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EPISCOPAL DIVINITY SCHOOL

TOWARDS *COMPANERISMO*:

A THEOLOGY OF RELATIONAL EMBODIMENT

A THESIS SUBMITTED  
IN PARTIAL FULLFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF ARTS

BY  
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CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS  
MARCH 1989



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## PREFACE

In a society and culture slowly awakening to the impact of rampant individualism and self-serving action, the quest for "community" has become a central focus of life for many people here in these United States. In particular, the concept has been picked up by the Christian churches as they reflect on the "communal" foundation of their faith, as they understand it. It is the contention of this paper that much of what is both sought and understood as "community" falls far short of the commitment to relationships of solidarity and empowerment which are essential to the well-being not only of humankind, but of the earth itself and of the divine/human relationship.

There are many terms I use in this work which may cause some confusion, given that I do not always use them in the sense in which they have been traditionally understood. Most of these are explained in the body of the text. Some seem to need brief explanation at the outset. Unless otherwise noted, all dictionary definitions are from Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary.

My use of the Spanish word *compañerismo* embodies the need to incorporate into any understanding of "community"



the elements of communal struggle towards a life of full dignity and justice for earth and her peoples. *Compañerismo* is derived from *compañera/o*, companion, the terms used by "communities" of resistance and justice-seeking in Central America to describe those brothers and sisters upon whom they can count in the struggle for long-term transformation of unjust structures. No easy grace abides in *compañerismo*; no certitude that long-term results will be seen in one's lifetime. Yet *compañera/os* know themselves to be in a long tradition of like-hearted companions, past, present and yet to come, whose energies nurture and are nurtured by their own, and by the presence of the sacred in and among them.

The term "mutuality" appears in a variety of contexts in the current work, always describing an ultimate goal of relationships between and among people, people and the sacred, the variety of beingness which inhabits our world. Margaret Huff's definition is helpful in developing an understanding of mutuality:

Mutuality is not a static state, not a bookkeeper's quid pro quo reciprocity, not a lowest common denominator bland equality. Mutuality is a dynamic process in which all are active participants, and in which each may be the initiator of a particular aspect of the process at any given time...

The response may alter the form of the dynamic, or its substance, in a minor way... Or the response may be a radically different alternative...

Justice is the primary criterion, not equality. So the relationship between a father and child can be mutual if it is just, even though it is unequal...

Justice is empowerment. (Huff 1988b, 2-3)



The goal of interactions in such relationships as those described by Huff is always towards empowerment of both or all parties involved. Mutuality cannot exist, in this definition, in relationships in which institutionalized power imbalances impede the true growth towards equality of the participants. Thus analysis of the institutions of sexism, racism, classism, heterosexism and clericalism, to name a few, is vital in the search for mutuality.

I use the term "privilege" to denote the benefits accruing to individuals and groups as a result of power imbalances which deny those same privileges to others on the basis of race, class, gender, sexual orientation etc. As a woman, I am denied a certain privilege which is extended to my brothers by institutionalized sexism. As a white, middle-class woman, I benefit from the privileges guaranteed by my white skin and relative economic security through the institutions of racism and classism. Issues of privilege are complex, particularly in solidarity work. Few of us are universally "privileged." Yet my sisters' and brothers' lack of access to resources I take for granted is a continual challenge in terms of the ways in which I use the undeniable privilege which is mine. There is no way to give up the "privilege," for example, of advanced education, nor is this necessarily a valid goal. The question centers on responsible analysis and understanding of that privilege in terms of the uses to which I put it.



Theology has always been written out of the author's bias and particularity, regardless of claims of objectivity. In Chapter I, then, I explore my particular "biases" and particularities from which emerge the questions addressed in the rest of the work. In Chapter II, I look briefly at the history of dualism and body negativity which has had a particularly destructive impact on our capacity to relate as embodied beings living in relationship with an organic, living world. I re-visit the concept of incarnation in Chapter III as it might be more effectively understood as "relational embodiment" of the sacred in humankind and all creative/creating life.

In Chapter IV, I turn to the issue of relationship as fundamental to fully human (and other) being. In Chapter V, I begin a critique of "community" as it has come to be practiced and understood. In Chapter VI, I look at the previously developed themes in light of my own religious congregation, and begin to develop an image of what *compañerismo* might look like in such a context.

It is impossible to cite all of the "sources" which have contributed to this work. So many of the concepts developed here are the results of conversations, casual and more formal, in a myriad of contexts. There are, however, persons whose contributions have been profound.



For the theological energy which not only continues to provide continual challenge and nourishment for my own, but which also led me initially to consider undertaking graduate theological study, I am indebted to Carter Heyward. For the realization that I cannot undertake theological work without incorporating the analysis demanded by social ethics, and for enabling me to deepen the skills needed for such investigation, I thank Beverly Harrison and Katie Cannon. For her development of an approach to Feminist Pastoral Counselling, which recognizes the relationship of individual growth and healing to wider social structures, and for nourishing with me the relational space in which this work has evolved, my gratitude to Peg Huff. To Demaris Wehr and Diane Moore, my thanks for their care in reading and responding to my work.

My deep appreciation also goes to my community, the Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace, for their nurturance, love and trust in supporting me in my theological education, the focus of which has been new and more than a little frightening in the challenges it continues to pose for me as an individual and for us as a group.

Above all, I am grateful to all of the above women for affirming me when I doubted, for encouraging me in acquiring skills I believed were beyond me, for truly being *compañeras*. In their faith and presence, women/energy and creative challenge, I have been increasingly empowered to



speak what I must speak, and to claim the right, the capacity and the responsibility to move on to the next step. In their faith and presence I have glimpsed the possibility of *compañerismo*.



## CHAPTER I

### NAMING BIASES AND PARTICULARITIES

#### The Particularities of My Being

I begin this thesis, as I do all of my theological work, immersed in what seems to be contradiction and paradox. Nowhere does this reality become more apparent than in the terms I choose to describe my own particularity and my work, for I am aware that most of these descriptions will have an oxymoronic quality for my readers. Yet still I claim to be a radical feminist Roman Catholic woman; a passionate, embodied and sexual member of a religious congregation whose affiliates profess the traditional three vows of poverty, obedience and celibacy; a "Christian" woman who claims that incarnation and salvation did not happen once and for all time and for all people in the person of Jesus of Nazareth; a student of theology who looks ahead to the probability of spending most of her life in the academy yet whose primary commitments are to those who live life at the margins of church, academy and society in general. With most of my sisters with whom I share such seeming anomalies, I ask, "Am I crazy?"



The Church Fathers in the Vatican would answer a resounding "YES." Worse than crazy, in fact. Deluded and deeply sinful. Many of my sisters in community would agree, though with more gentleness and perhaps even a doubt or two, for in many ways they know and trust me. Fundamentalist Christians might shake their heads in disbelief that I would dare claim any right to the Christian heritage. And the academy would simply shake its collective head and mourn the lack of "academic rigor and integrity."

I could leave the Roman Catholic Church, my religious community and Christianity itself, yet such an action does not, at this point, seem to offer a solution. For each institution, as well as causing much pain and struggle, has been a part of my growth into who I am today. Each has provided an historical location for those who went before, a locus of resistance and hope in the face of oppression and despair, and thus gives me a past, a lineage of foresisters whose lives inform my own. Each has also contributed to the disembodiment which is the focus of this thesis, and it is this last, in the context of my continuing participation in these structures and systems, which challenges me to share the responsibility for bringing about life-enhancing change. Out of these paradoxical, even contradictory, realities, I choose to remain in dialogue, to retain such institutional connections.



Yet I must also live my truth as a sexual, sensual, embodied being, despite the conflict in which it places me in terms of these institutions in which I continue to locate myself. This is the truth which has forced me to clarify my "people" -- those for and with whom I do my work. I do not work for those who hold the power in place in the Church, the Academy, or even my own community. The norms which emerge from my own particularity, in the context of a hermeneutic (interpretive principle) of relational embodiment, insist that my people, those to and with whom I am accountable, are those who have been pushed to the margins of those institutions, and of most of society's structures, often by the very systems supposedly set up to serve their best interests. With no little trepidation, I see my own commitments and accountabilities spiralling me towards some of those same margins. But perhaps it is only at the margins that solidarity gains meaning and authenticity.

A hermeneutic of relational embodiment is rooted in a number of "biases" (in liberation theological terms, "preferential options") which I claim at the outset. I make no apology for the particularity which informs my work, or for the commitments (biases) which flow from that particularity.

Particularity is the window of all joy, sorrow, and knowledge for all of us.... And while [my



particularities) limit my truth-claims, they also ground and nourish them. (Heyward 1989a, 13)

My own work, then, is "grounded and nourished" by my commitments to suspicion, to transformation of this world, to the inherent goodness of earth/matter, and to women. I look now at some of my basic presuppositions and understandings of each of these realities.

Suspicion:

I am suspicious of tradition, truth, scripture, history, authority and institutions, especially religious institutions. I know that I cannot expect any of these generally to support the best interests of my communities of accountability. Such institutions are built and maintained by power structures which are dependent upon the disempowered acquiescence of all those who are defined as "outside" of the normative definition. With Mary Anne Tolbert, I believe that,

Feminist hermeneutics is not the deviant, subjective position to be contrasted to hermeneutics (no adjective), the objective, value-neutral position of the group in power. No value-neutral position exists nor ever has. Feminist hermeneutics stands over against patriarchal hermeneutics, an advocacy position for the male-oriented, hierarchically established present cultural power system. (Tolbert 1983, 118)

Transformation of this World:

All of theology is, overtly or covertly, for better or for worse, applied, or at least applicable to the lives of earth and earth's people. The "praxis" which is at the center of my feminist liberational approach involves



removing the dichotomy between academic enquiry and the "real world." Thus the distinctions between theology, ethics and pastoral psychology become blurred, and in many situations are distortions of the relationality of all of life.

The Goodness of Earth/Matter:

I have a deep and passionate belief in the beauty of our earth-home, its inhabitants -- human and otherwise -- and of what I see and know of the wider cosmic realm. The presence of the holy is indeed incarnate, embodied in all of creation, and our experience of the sacred is through our own embodied reality. Earth and all creating/creative matter is good, holy and interrelated in its very being. Therefore, among my commitments must be a passionate option for the earth and all the communities, human and otherwise, which she supports. The destruction of the beauty of the earth, which is our home and one of our fullest manifestations of the holy, is desecration in the most complete sense of the word. From a more pragmatic perspective, all our work for justice will be for naught if in the process we destroy the only home we have upon which to live the "new creation."

Women:

I place the lives of women, especially those most marginalized, at the center of my concern. While acknowledging that the experiences of women of color, poor



women, and women who are battered by their husbands, for example, are not mine, I nonetheless hold myself accountable for their health and well-being. There are three specific communities of women to whom I owe a special degree of accountability: my religious congregation, the lesbian community and "communities" of poor women.

My religious community holds my allegiance on a number of levels. First, our tradition of seeking "Peace through Justice for all of God's people," with a specific focus on women, remains a strong and empowering link with past, present and future. I am challenged by those who have gone before me and left a heritage of prophetic words and action; I accept the challenge to assist in holding today's community accountable to that heritage. Second, I remain committed to the healing of those of my sisters whose history in religious life has inflicted on them the pain of authoritarianism, scrupulosity and a disembodied spirituality. Third, and of most significance for the current discussion, I know the joy of sharing with at least a group of my sisters radically new and empowering possibilities for the future of religious sisterhoods of women. The glimpses I have received, in my community, of the power of women-bonding indeed has led me to this project. These glimpses, fragile and glimmering though they may be, lead me to believe that there may be no more powerful -- or empowering -- reality on this earth than the



connective power of women-energy... and nothing more fearful to women themselves or threatening to those holding structures of power in place.

The lesbian community both supports and challenges me in exploring issues of embodiment and sexuality in relation to community and to my above-named "bias" in favor of the holiness of embodied being. The challenges posed in this area range from dealing with issues of homophobia and other sexual phobias, in the context of my community, to analysis of the cultural phenomenon of compulsory heterosexuality. On a deeply personal level, my awareness of the rich gift of my own lesbian identity challenges me to explore the meaning of faithfulness to a variety of commitments: to the Sisters of Peace, to my sisters everywhere and to the woman with whom I know the richness of fully embodied love.

Communities of poor women continue to hold me accountable as I recall my years spent working with homeless women in Seattle, and as I commit myself to on-going work around issues of daily economic survival for such women and their children. No, their reality is not mine, but the words of Kathryn, Dawn, Terri, Jan and Janis are with me. Their lives and experiences give purpose to my work. They are my "so what?" when I am in danger of opting for theological "academentia" (Daly 1987, 184).

Clearly, my commitments do not end with the communities of accountability with whom I am most personally connected.



I cannot live in this country and neglect my relationship with the people of Central America whose oppression is intensified daily by the U.S. government. Time spent in Guatemala has given me new connections and relationships with individuals there, and with indigenous peoples there and in this country in their struggle to maintain a culture of relational community from which we all might learn much. Correspondence from friend Denise in South Africa brings home to me a new degree of awareness of the complexity of that struggle for justice.

This seemingly-endlessly widening circle of commitments informs my hermeneutic of relational embodiment. The starting point of my enquiry, my theology, my vision of creation, is that there is nothing to which I am not in some way connected. I continue to grapple with the questions I have raised for myself but not by myself; for myself but not for myself alone.

As I experience the passion of my response to such diverse realities as a lonely Pacific beach or a snow-clad mountain, the tears of a father of a "disappeared" daughter in Guatemala, a newspaper story about yet another woman violently raped or homeless families trying to get their children into school, the lusty embrace of my lover or a meal shared in community, I know my relationship to each and all. Somewhere in the varied experiences and expressions of these relational commitments lies the foundation of whatever



truths and faith-claims I come to own. Here too lies the tension of acknowledging the particularity of my experience, and at the same time of knowing that I experience life only through its relationality. This is where I know most deeply the need for true community, as Webster defines it as "mutual participation," in the continuing struggle towards greater life for all. And this is where I know too the failure of so much of what we have named "Christian community" to function in an embodied and life-enhancing way.

### The Particularity of Christology

Traditional Christian communities are rooted in one of a variety of understandings of the life and ministry of Jesus the Christ... orthodox Christologies. Why, then, do I choose to do Christology, or, more accurately, to use this name at all for what I do? One dimension of the answer is that, given the impact of Christology as it has been historically understood in Western Christianity, we ignore it at our peril. We have no choice but to grapple with and attempt to comprehend the implications and influence of the message which permeates most of western culture.

Insofar as biblical religion is still influential today, a cultural and social feminist transformation of Western society must take into account the biblical story and the historical impact of the biblical tradition. Western women are not able to discard completely and forget our personal, cultural or religious Christian history. We will either trans-



form it into a new liberating future or continue to be subject to its tyranny whether we recognize its power or not. (Schussler Fiorenza 1983, xix)

The deep pain experienced today by those who are victims of Christian imperialism in its multi-faceted forms is testimony to the demonic power of unexamined premises, and of historical realities too facilely dismissed when they do not appear to offer immediate healing and hope as they stand. The abused woman who is counselled by her "pastor" to "pick up her cross and follow Jesus" by staying in a violent domestic situation all too often has internalized enough of such a self-denying "Christianity" that she will endure incredible hardship and suffering in the effort to "obey." Assisting the woman to leave the situation is insufficient, however, without also addressing her need to replace a destructive religious ideology with one which can affirm her right and power to consider her own life needs and wants, and addressing the issue of an abusive pastor.

There is a degree of accountability I experience as a woman with a Christian history and heritage for the pain of my abused sisters, of victims of Christian imperialism in Guatemala, Asia and here in these United States, of Jewish people these past two thousand years. No, I was not personally responsible for the atrocities enacted in the name of God and/or Christ, as I was not personally responsible for the institution and practice of slavery. Yet insofar as I benefit from the privilege of being part of



the dominant culture, ideology or tradition, I share the responsibility for maintaining patterns of domination, or for participating in their transformation.

Yet there are other more positive dimensions to my imperative to continue working with Christian history and Christology. For it is within that tradition that I have developed the moral and ethical stances which lead me to my work for liberation. My awareness of this reality keeps me seeking the roots of that liberating and empowering source which has somehow survived, deeply buried beneath the strata of institutional Christianity.

As human beings, we have a basic need for connection with our personal and collective pasts. Our past, as women in Christianity, is ambivalent at best. Feminist historians have worked hard in the effort to determine the extent to which Christian history, including biblical history, contains seeds of liberation for women. Their efforts range from attempts to claim that the bible really was and is a liberation document and has simply been mis-interpreted, to claims that scripture was patriarchal from its inception and women's role and story must be read from what is not written. To what extent does the recovery of such a past help our efforts at empowering one another in life-affirming choices today? And what role, positive or negative, does institutional Christianity play in the on-going reclamation of women's full religious/spiritual agency? I do not expect



to answer these questions in the pages of this paper, yet the urgency and seriousness with which they are asked by women throughout Western Christianity highlights the powerful impact still exerted in women's lives by the Jesus story, and by their general relationship to their faith history.

For it is our story. As Rosemary Radford Ruether asserts, "We are not in exile but the Church is in exodus with us" (Ruether 1985, 172). What are the elements in the Jesus story which have proven empowering, if often only in their potential, not only for Christians but also for the wider earth community? It is the thesis of the following pages that the basic impulse present in Christianity (and in some other world religions, albeit differently expressed) is that of incarnation -- embodiment -- enfleshment -- of the divine in all the rich fullness of life which abounds within and around the communities of being who share this earth.

My hermeneutic of relational embodiment, then, seeks to re-incarnate the sacred firmly at the heart of human and other life in this world, not in a narcissistic manner in which the making of God in man's image continues unabated, but in the context of something I will call *compañerismo*. I borrow this term from the Spanish word for "community" because it connotes a richer and less trivialized meaning than its now relatively senseless and disembodied English equivalent. *Compañerismo*, from the word *compañero/a*,



conjures no images of cozy togetherness of a homogeneous group of like-minded friends. Rather, it brings to mind the reality that "community takes on life and meaning when people commit themselves to struggle for the sake of transforming the communities in which they live" (Boyte, 1986:23). Before moving into further discussion of how *compañerismo* is central to a thesis of incarnation, however, it is necessary to reveal the deincarnation which has taken place through 2,000 years of Christian history, and to re-examine the implications of a renewed sense of embodiment as the essence of the Christian message.



## CHAPTER II

### DISEMBODYING THE HOLY

Ironically, the more emphasis Christianity has placed on The Incarnation as a once and for all time event taking place in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, the more the Church has felt it necessary to de-incarnate the rest of creation. The original impulse of Christianity, that of the embodiment of the sacred in the midst of humankind, was clearly reflected in the embodied tradition of Judaism, although the Holy One was believed to be too awe-full to be gazed upon directly. In this chapter, I will look at the ways in which incarnation came to be individualized in the person of Jesus, and the spiritualization -- or de-incarnation -- which this made possible in the context of an already pervasive dualistic worldview.

Websters dictionary offers four finely nuanced definitions of *dualism*. Three speak of a theory, quality or doctrine of reality as composed of two irreducible parts. The fourth is of greatest interest to the present discussion: "A doctrine that the universe is under the dominion of two opposing principles one of which is good and the other evil." From the time of Plato, this appears to be



the definition which has been widely applied, not only to the "doctrine of the universe" but also to the "doctrine" of the nature of "man" and "his" relationship with "his" world, and, at least since Augustine, to the doctrines of Christian faith.

Before going into some of the historical development of disembodied dualistic thinking, I want to make clear that here again a "hermeneutic of suspicion" is in order. The development of dualities was more than a benign attempt to make sense out of a confusing world. The division of creation into spirit and matter, and the corresponding devaluation of the latter and its association with women, earth, people of color and other derogated groups, contains within it the establishment of mechanisms of hierarchical power and control for the continuing self-affirmation of those whose experience comes to define the norm, that which is of most value, that which is closest to God. This self-affirmation of the power-full has come at the expense of devastating internalization of their own inferiority for the power-less. I am not suggesting that such insidious power-based defining has always been on a conscious level. I am insisting that the benefits accrued by the power-brokers have been a full and adequate incentive to accept without question a set of assumptions based on misinformation and myth.



The separation of the soul from the body was central to Plato's philosophy. Transcendence of the body, through the control of the passions, was the goal of the moral life. Plato's concepts of ideal love were spiritualized by being totally removed from any reference to material reality or sexuality. In fact, the "pure soul" welcomed death as "the radical (and desired) decoupling of mind and body" (Flax, 1983:258). But Plato did not stop at separating mind/soul from body: even within the soul is like hierarchical ordering:

Does it not belong to the rational part to rule, being wise and exercising forethought in behalf of the entire soul, and to the principle of high spirit to be subject to this and its ally?... And these two thus reared and having learned and been educated to do their own work in the true sense of the phrase, will preside over the appetitive part which is the mass of the soul in each of us and the most insatiate by nature of wealth. (Plato, The Republic IV, 441E - 442A)

Not only did Plato make very clear the relationship of ruler and ruled which must exist between the three parts of the soul which he identifies. He was also all too clear as to which part must be in control. The rational must at all times rule the passions. Indeed, it is for the control of these passions that the state exists. The well-ordered soul is the model for the ordering of household relationships, and for the Republic (Flax 1983, 255). And already it is clear that the male is the one to be identified with the "rational," the one who must be in control at each level of society.



Aristotle, like Plato, identified rational and irrational elements of the soul, and deemed it "natural and expedient" for the rational to rule over the irrational. His observation that this rule of the rational did not always occur, especially in women, children and slaves, gave further strength to his assertion of the "entitlement" of "rational man" to the prime exercise of authority (Spelman 1983). Steeped in the cultural acceptance of woman's "natural" inferiority, Aristotle saw them as admirably suited to the "lesser" functions which they were performing. He simply set about determining a new explanation for why this was so, through his elaborate development of a theory of "ensoulment" through "vital heat" contained, of course, in the male's semen (Lange 1983). Lange goes on to explain the basis on which Aristotle avoids questioning, or even acknowledging, his own underlying assumptions:

Since Aristotle's view of soul (i.e., life) was teleological, he saw the nature of living things in terms of function or purpose... Thus the type of soul of such social groups as women or slaves, according to Aristotle, fitted them, not surprisingly, for the function which they happened to be fulfilling. (Lange 1983, 9)

Despite the early intimations of a more inclusive impulse in Christianity, one more in line with its Hebrew roots of appreciation for nature and this world, the early church did not long resist the temptation to turn the life of Jesus into a spiritualized event. Paul Knitter states that "the author of John 1:1-16 was the first to take



that step which no Hellenistic-Jewish author had taken before him, the first to identify the word of God as a particular person" (Knitter 1985, 180). Rosemary Radford Ruether echoes this understanding in reflecting on Jewish and early Christian conceptions of messianism.

Judaism looked to the messianic coming as a public, world-historical event which unequivocally overthrew the forces of evil in the world and established the reign of God. Originally Christianity also understood Jesus' messianic role in terms of an imminent occurrence of this coming reign of God. But when this event failed to materialize, Christianity pushed it off into an indefinite future, i.e. the Second Coming, and reinterpreted Jesus' messianic role in inward and personal ways that had little resemblance to what the Jewish tradition meant by the coming of the Messiah. (Ruether 1983a, 32)

The spiritualized, individualized concept of a personal savior became the hallmark of Christianity when the early Christian community lost its sense of rootedness in the highly embodied, communal history of the Hebrew people.

This deincarnation process began early. Knitter identifies four "trajectories" which outline a plurality of Christologies present in the early Church, all of which carry within them the impulse to give an other-worldly emphasis to what was originally a highly embodied event (the life of Jesus of Nazareth) and to invest in this Jesus, increasingly spiritualized as the kerygmatic Christ, the once and for all salvation of all peoples.

Knitter's first trajectory names *parousia* christologies, those that "saw Jesus as the final prophet (and) arose in



the social context of Jewish apocalypticism with its intense desire for the final restitution of God's rule for Israel" (Knitter 1985, 176). Secondly, Knitter outlines a *divine man* christology, presenting Jesus as "a divine agent, able to perform wondrous deeds" (176). Third are *wisdom* and *logos* christologies, "which expressed the believers' experience of him (Jesus) as the servant, bringer, and teacher of divine wisdom" (177). Finally Knitter speaks of the *paschal* christologies which emphasized that "in his resurrection, even before the Final Coming, Jesus had accomplished everything" (177).

The major point Knitter seeks to make is that a plurality of christologies existed from the earliest days of the Church, even preceding the written records of canonical scripture. The importance of his observations for this work is that within such a plurality of positions lies a remarkable similarity in that each of these christological perspectives sets Jesus apart from the human condition, thus setting in motion the tendency to see salvation and the final establishment of the realm of God as outside of and apart from human agency in this world. This disassociation of the early church from its Jewish roots has been a major factor in the anti-Semitism of Christianity through the intervening ages. The emphasis on Jesus the Christ as the last, perfect "Word of God" has led to an imperialistic



exclusivism which continues to deny the possibility of genuine dialogue with other faith traditions.

Given his knowledge of classical Greek philosophy, and the Christologies developed in the early Church, it is not surprising that Augustine went on to place the dualistic worldview in a "Christian" context. After the fall of Rome signalled the end of Western civilization as they had known it, Augustine and the people of his day had to deal with a world where their prior expectations were completely overturned. But if life in this world had become chaotic and uncertain, there was another yet to come when everything would once again be ordered as it should be. The goal of the earthly city was still to achieve happiness and peace, yet Augustine insisted that this could only be "temporal peace, in proportion to the short span of a mortal life," in contrast to the peace of the Heavenly City, which is a "perfectly ordered and perfectly harmonious fellowship in the enjoyment of God" (City of God, Book XIX, Ch 13).

We must prepare personally and individually for our participation in the "heavenly city," guided, of course, by ecclesial patriarchs. Such preparation, for Augustine, meant subordinating the lower part of our natures, our bodies, in order to elevate the soul which, although capable of being tainted by sin, is not corruptible and given to passion as is the body.



Thomas Aquinas, continuing the tradition of his illustrious forefathers, accepted unquestioningly the now deeply imbedded belief in a divinely ordered hierarchy of creation, with body subordinated to soul:

But it pertains to divine providence, of which divine law is but a rational plan proposed by God to man, to see that individual things keep their proper order. Therefore man must be so ordered by divine law that his lower powers may be subject to reason, and his body to his soul, and so that external things may subserve the needs of man. (Summa Contra Gentiles, Bk 3 Vol II, Ch 121, 2)

The divinely mandated order of command was in place: God over all; man over woman, slave, child, natural world; soul over body; reason over passion. The "higher" qualities became linked, so that soul, reason and man became synonomous, and in opposition to body, passion and woman. Clearly, in such a perspective, notions of God mirrored the image of the superior qualities. The holy one must, therefore, be male yet devoid of passion and body. Any sense of such a divinity becoming "incarnate" in fleshy, bloody passionate living was out of the question. The Incarnation could occur only once, and that once without the usual "sinful" sexual encounter to initiate the process. Despite the first century condemnation of docetism as a heresy, the once-human Jesus came to be seen as a disembodied spiritual figure who offered hope for escape from this vale of tears into an eschatological realm where we would all be released from the trials of physicality.



The Reformation did nothing to redress the imbalance of a Christianity with its heart and mind firmly fixed on the afterlife.

Throughout Christian tradition this work of deincarnation has continued. We have been divided from the holy, from one another, from creation, from the integrity of our own being by this refusal to recognize incarnation -- the heart of our faith -- as the literal embodiment of the holy.



## CHAPTER III

### INCARNATION RE-VISITED

One day when I was sitting quiet and feeling like a motherless child, which I was, it come to me: that feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed. And I laughed and I cried and I run all round the house. I knew just what it was. In fact, when it happen, you can't miss it. It sort of like you know what, she say, grinning and rubbing high up on my thigh.

*Shug! I say.*

Oh, she say. God love all them feelings. That's some of the best stuff God did. And when you know God loves 'em you enjoys 'em a lot more. You can just relax, go with everything that's going, and praise God by liking what you like.

God don't think it dirty" I ast.

Naw, she say. God made it. (Walker 1982, 167)

Alice Walker's The Color Purple, in particular pages 164-168, could and probably should constitute a foundational text for any theological exploration. Here is a sacred canon which expresses an integration of the whole of human being and speaks profoundly of true incarnation. In Walker's holy story, told through the life experiences of Shug and Celie, is an expression of a deeply embodied spirituality of relatedness, of a God folks "come to church to share," not find, a God who gets "pissed off" if "you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't



notice it," a God who is profoundly present and responsive in relationship with all that is, and who can both move and be moved in mutual relationship (165-167). It is the powerfully immanent God described by Starhawk:

The dark is kind and charged with a friendly power: the power of the unseen, the power that comes from within, the power of the immanent Goddess who lies coiled in the heart of every cell of every living thing, who is the spark of every nerve and the life of every breath. (Starhawk 1982, xiv)

However one names the sacred, these words of Starhawk's express poetically and clearly what I am saying when I speak of incarnation as the creative potential inherent, though ill-expressed, in the strand of Christianity outlined above. In this chapter, I will explore the implications of "re-incarnating the holy" in three major areas of our lives: for our view of ourselves as part of the total web of embodied, relational being; for our understanding of concepts of creation and creativity; and for our God images themselves.

### A Web of Being

Earlier, I stated that "earth and all creating/creative matter is good, holy and interrelated in its very being." Such an assertion insists that an acceptance of humankind's place in the midst of the entire realm of cosmic being and evolution expands rather than diminishes a sense of awe of the sacred power we often call God.



Our reverence for the holy must expand to include the whole numinous universe. What are the relics today? We are the relics, the Earth and all beings of Earth were there in the core of that exploding supernova. We were there in the distant, terrifying furnace of the primeval fireball. Not as mere witnesses, either, but as central to the event. Our bodies remember that event, exulting in the majesty of the night sky precisely because all suffered it together. The planet is a rare and holy relic of every event of twenty billion years of cosmic development. (Swimme 1985, 60)

Human chauvinism, that is, setting humankind at the center of life, or, more accurately, the top of an hierarchical pyramid of being, has led to a situation where we have within our power the capacity to bring an end to life as we know it. Not only do we hold the potential for a life-ending cataclysmic holocaust in our nuclear silos, but we also participate daily in the poisoning of earth, water and air, foolishly continuing the 18th Century Enlightenment confidence in "man's" ingenuity to rectify whatever damage we inflict.

Christian understanding of stewardship, coming onto the scene in the midst of a dualistic worldview which saw the material world as something to be subdued and taken care of only in the sense of keeping it available to "mankind" for "his" own use and purposes, has been violently distorted to support the idea of human "mastery" over the environment. Sally McFague suggests that an appropriate metaphor to aid in addressing such a situation is that of the world as God's body (McFague 1987). To see humankind as integrally related with that environment, mutually interdependent with it, is



to challenge traditional notions of incarnation. The planet does indeed become a "rare and holy relic."

This is not, however, an invitation to continue the historic degradation of the human body, of human physicality. On the contrary, to see ourselves as part of the immense splendor of the universe is to affirm our human being as a divinely constituted element in the whole web of life.

Our bodies are not only communities in themselves but, even more, communities in relationship with the earth. Our bodily fluids carry the same chemicals as the primeval seas. Quite literally, we carry those seas within ourselves. Our bones contain the same carbon as that which forms the rock of the oldest mountains. Our blood contains the sugar that once flowed in the sap of now-fossilized trees. The nitrogen which binds our bones together is the same as that which binds nitrates to the soil.

Our bodies tell us that we are one with the whole earth. Our bodies are revelations of God's new heaven and new earth. (Nelson 1983, 35)

Human beings are distinct from, not superior to other forms of life. It is important here to keep in mind the distinction Catherine Keller (1986) makes among connective, soluble and separative selves. In connection, one becomes neither absorbed into the other nor remains isolated and separate. Rather, one acknowledges connection as the basis of being and becoming, and continues the process of growth into full selfhood through nurturing those connections which enhance such fullness of being.

In mutual connection, no party is superior to the other, although both or all retain their distinctiveness. This



mutual interdependence, the basic fact of our being, whether we claim it or not, is of vital importance for our continuing health as a species, as co-earthlings, as a planet.

Such an understanding of ourselves as inherently connected and interrelated with the very stuff and matter of the universe through our own body-beings, brings with it a vastly different sense of our relationship with the world around us. Dumping filth into our rivers and oceans becomes self-destruction and blasphemy. The deforestation of a massive percentage of earth's surface condemns future generations of human and other life to probable extinction. If even the stones and streams and willows and chipmunks are intimately... integrally... related to us, what can justify our continuing to treat most of our human sisters and brothers as objects to be manipulated for maximization of profits and our own "best" interests?

In such a worldview, historical Christian claims of incarnation as a once-and-for-all event in the person of Jesus come into serious doubt. The incarnation -- embodiment -- of the holy in material reality can never be fully represented by any one person, being or event. To make such a claim is to severely limit the creativity and potential of the sacred power which beats at the heart of the universe, and to allow us to abnegate our mutual responsibility for one another and for the planet. To the



extent that each person, flower, tree or creature unfolds into the fullness of its potential, in the community of life of which it is an integral part, then that one incarnates the presence of the holy and participates in the on-going embodiment of creation.

### Creator or Creating?

Several years ago, as part of a personal growth seminar, I was challenged as part of the process to identify and name my own gifts and talents. Later, in the group sharing, a number of the participants named "creativity" as a personal characteristic of which they were aware in themselves. It was not a word that had occurred to me, yet each time I heard it repeated a knot deepened in my gut. Two weeks and much soul-searching later, I added "creative" to my list. Finally I was able to realize that my definition of the term -- which included only such exponents of the creative spirit as Beethoven, Virginia Wolfe and Monet -- had ignored the creativity which surrounded me and yes, even emerged from me, on a day to day basis.

Our western religious heritage carries the responsibility for much of our mistrust of our own creative powers. The "de-incarnation" which has deeply divided us from the sacred potential within and among us as embodied beings sharing life in this world has placed both the



responsibility and the delights of genuine creativity firmly in the hands of God the Father. Catherine Keller asks,

Why is it so stupid, so embarrassing, to imagine a creator interdependent with the creation? Quite clearly because this God is to stay absolutely self-sufficient, independent of the world... Our love is absolute dependence; his love an infinite transcendence. In our culture this God could only take the pronoun *he*. For is this not the ultimately separate subject, before whom all humanity (male and female) tremble, emasculated and dissolved into the role of the feminine dependent? (Keller 1986, 35)

The concept of a sole Creator in control of all He has created has both deadened our creative energies and allowed us to relinquish responsibility for any participation in on-going creation. As long as we name the sacred power we experience in all of being "Creator," we risk falling into a dichotomy between the actor and the acted-upon. Naming ourselves as "created in the image of God the Creator" gives us a mandate to continue the work of creation, but only as delegates of the unchanging one who retains the real power. This split, I believe, leads to the denial of our creative powers and to the abnegation of our responsibility for the life we share with human and other beings on this earth.

Working as God's chosen representatives allows an avoidance of responsibility from two perspectives. First, we can take the position that God the Creator remains in charge and so will intervene and not let anything terrible happen to "his" creation, whatever we may do. Our other



option is to adopt a fatalistic attitude which believes that whatever happens will be the will of God and thus is outside of our responsibility or power to change.

If the prime activity of God is that of creation and if humankind is indeed created in the image and likeness of that deity, on-going participation in the work of creation is basic to human being. As Dorothee Soelle suggests, "co-creation [with God] means a little more" than "planting flowers in the garden and feeling good about it" (Soelle 1984, 38).

God is "no one" but is rather a transpersonal spirit, power in relation, which depends upon humanity for good/making justice/making love/making God incarnate in the world. To do so is to undo evil. The doing of good and undoing of evil is a human act, a human responsibility. God is our power to do this. (Heyward 1982, 159)

To address the realities facing our global society today, we must depose any god(s) who pretend(s) to stand apart and separate from the joys and struggles of everyday, embodied life.

It is the premise of this paper that the incarnational message of early Christianity was a proclamation that "God, the heavenly Ruler, has left the heavens and has been poured out upon the earth" (Ruether 1983b, 11). The question might well be raised as to whether a God ever did reside in the heavens in any reality other than the minds of men -- and I use the term intentionally. Keller reminds us that "No tenet of Christian theology has stood so firmly -- and with



so little scriptural justification -- as the divine unchangingness" (Keller 1986, 36). But the God who is "poured out upon the earth," within the earth, among all the species of beings who inhabit the earth, cannot be static. It is time to image the sacred power we call God as intimately engaged in a creative dance with all being, not as creator and created, creator and creation, but as creative and creating, together, changing and evolving into ever-greater fullness of life.

This is the image of creativity which needs to be redeemed, in relation to the divine, to our own basic creative impulses and to the creativity which imbues all life and being. Only through unleashing this creative power which lies dormant, oppressed, often almost obliterated, can we make real the promise of incarnation: the full embodied presence of the divine in all life and being.

### Re-imaging the Holy

I am not claiming that there is no sacred power, which many name as "God," beyond the creativity we experience in ourselves and one another. To assert that the holy one is present nowhere if not in the daily flesh and blood existence of the here and now world, that is to say, immanent and incarnate, is by no means to deny that there is a power of creativity at work which is far beyond our



capacities to behold or to imagine. What I do claim, however, is that traditional understandings of transcendence do not enable us to know the God who is present in all being.

The word "transcend" is derived from the Latin *transcendere*, to climb across. I suggest that such a meaning might better serve our current discussion than the more commonly held view that transcendence implies an otherness, separation, a hierarchical superiority which soars above and beyond the ordinary. To view transcendence as "climbing across" puts it in close connection with "incarnation" and evokes imagery of bridging and connection. Can we not as validly assert that the above discussion of incarnation, which places God squarely at the center of embodied being, implies transcendence, climbing across the gulf which has been created historically between the sacred and the profane?

Sharon Welch describes how, in Liberation Theologies such as that of Gustavo Gutierrez, "transcendence is often described in terms of the bonds of solidarity that extend beyond individual existence" (Welch 1985, 45). She continues:

"Transcendence" is distinctly historical: it consists in the power to overcome given historical conditions. Transcendence is expressed as the freedom to resist and to overturn oppression. (Welch 1985, 50)



Viewing the transcendence of an embodied God as a creative energy which empowers communities of resistance to overcome, to "climb across," the boundaries and barriers which separate them from the fullness of life is a far cry from the "old patriarch in the sky" who deigns to reach down to "his" creation in patronizing pity. This renewed understanding of transcendence allows us to see God as one whose energy and creativity can indeed permeate all of material being throughout the cosmos, in intimate engagement with all being in the on-going process of mutual relationship.

This is a God who cannot be kept out of the realm of the physical, sensual wonders and delight of the world. Starhawk's image of the divine as the "immanent Goddess who lies coiled in the heart of every cell" is the holy one whom I have known in the hugging of a moss-wrapped tree in the rain forest, in immersion in the cold yet eternal waters of a lonely Pacific beach, in a midnight hour spent holding a wounded friend, in weeping, raging and taking action against the injustices which pervade both ecclesial and secular social systems, in sharing life, laughter and love with my community and friends.

I propose that Christian fascination with the Jesus story is rooted in awe and wonder at just such an idea of God fully and completely present in human form, and in the rest of creation.



Cosmologist Brian Swimme maintains that "all communities of being are created in response to a prior mysterious alluring activity" (Swimme 1985, 49). We respond in such a way to the story of Jesus because the "prior alluring activity" of the sacred tells us in the depths of our being the truth that the Holy One is not separate, not distant, not other (even if more) than the life we feel pulsing in our own veins, enlivening our relationships, calling forth our delight in the beauty of the world around us. This could be the ultimate meaning of the life of Jesus. Yet our churches are painfully deficient in any such understanding or expression of the sacred. How many of us ask, with Alice Walker, "Have you ever found God in church" (Walker 1982, 165)?

The shock value of the incarnation as it was expressed in Jesus was to make evident to the community of believers who would follow him the presence of God in their own lives and in all of life around them. Such an understanding of the person and purpose of Jesus was and is deeply alarming to those who held (and hold) any position of authority, either ecclesial or civil. The divine position of "mediator" long assumed by clerics and civil rulers is effectively undermined if believers begin to take seriously their own "god-ness" as bearers of the reality of the holy.

This renewed awareness of the divine in all of life, and its resulting suspicion of institutional religion which



claims to "carry" such truth within its doctrines, is threatening to those who would continue to name themselves "Christian." One of the most painful experiences for a Christian-identified woman is when she first sees that the Church in which she has placed her hope and trust is part of, indeed a forerunner in, the structures of oppression which have hurt her and her sisters. Women's identity and sense of self are intimately connected with their relationships. In the absence of authentic spirituality, embodied in relational life, many women and men, yearning for deep and meaningful relationship with the holy, settle for dependency on ecclesial institutions which claim to carry "religious truth." Insights which threaten to shake one's faith in such institutions become deeply troubling and a source of fear.

But if Jesus' incarnation -- embodiment of the sacred -- was "merely" a more conscious understanding of a reality that is, or at least can be, true for all human being, what makes him "special?" Why should any of us continue to name ourselves Christian? I believe that Rosemary Ruether hints at the answer when she speaks of particularism as opposed to universalism (Ruether 1983a, 38). Ruether contrasts the Jewish and Christian notions of universalism. The Jewish people, she contends, have consistently seen universalism as meaning that their faith has something to contribute to all peoples. Never has this meant salvation only through



Judaism -- proselytism is not a part of the practice of Jewish faith. On the other hand, Christianity has, through its insistence on salvation only through Jesus the Christ, attempted to make universal its own particularity. An individualistic, competitive world view has contributed to our inability to see two things as different yet not necessarily mutually exclusive. Donald Seaton articulates clearly and simply a more dialogic possibility:

Each of us lives by a story. I live by my Christian story, and my Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim and Jewish brothers and sisters live by their stories. As we walk down our paths we count on our stories to make sense out of what we encounter. This is my simple way of talking about the paradigmatic function of myth. If one of my companions finds his story inadequate at some point on the path, I will be glad to share mine with him. And if, at some point, I should find my story inadequate, I will be glad to have a friend who will share her story with me.

(Seaton 1985, 21)

As we move towards more varied and wholistic ways of knowing and experiencing the sacred power which moves within and among and beyond our full comprehension, we shall also be able to let go of the need for certainty and absolutes which insist that if one concept is true, all others which stand in apparent contradiction must be false. Only by discovering such a way of relating to our sisters and brothers, including those of other faith traditions, and to the exquisite abundance of life with which we share this planet, is there hope for our communal survival and salvation.



## CHAPTER IV

### RELATIONSHIP: THE ESSENCE OF BEING

I believe in God, and... this faith-claim is rooted in my experience of humanity. I believe that God is our power in relation to each other, all humanity, and creation itself. God is creative power, that which effects justice -- right relation -- in history. God is the bond which connects us in such a way that each of us is em-powered to grow, work, play, love and be loved. (Heyward 1982, 5)

In the preceding chapters, I have explored some of the theological premises which underlie ideas of both incarnation and deincarnation. In particular, I have examined the way in which a renewed vision of a theology of incarnation speaks of the embodiment of the sacred in all of material being. It is time now to turn to the implications of such a claim for our life together as embodied relational human beings struggling to live freely and fully in communion with one another and with the world around us.

#### Fatal Disconnection

In April of 1985, Janice walked out of a women's shelter, waved as she passed my window, ostensibly on her way to work. Later that same day she found a secluded beach, walked out to a lonely rock where she had a last



cigarette, tied a plastic bag over her head and, already unconscious, waited for the incoming tide to end her struggle with alienation, depression and images of a future which seemed to promise only more of the same.

Raised by a succession of foster families, Jan did not know the exact year or place of her birth. Copies of letters she had written, trying to locate her birth certificate, gave poignant testimony to the devastation of a lack of connection with other human beings in terms of family and friends, and even in terms of her own history. Radically alone and disconnected, she came to us from a hospital psychiatric unit where she had undergone treatment following a suicide attempt.

Jan seemed to be doing "well" - and probably was: well enough to take a part-time job for the first time in years; well enough, perhaps, to take control of her life in an ultimate way - one which removed the dismal prospect of a future filled with deadend jobs, loneliness and isolation. Did Jan choose the water as her entry point into some final... and for her, first... "intimate bond with the universe[?]" (Keller 1986, 151)

#### The Lie of the Autonomous Self

Recent feminist scholarship has done much to alert us to our long "heritage" which equates the male experience with



human experience. The focus has, rightly, shifted from the nature/nurture controversy to a position which claims that, regardless of its origins, the *experience* of women, and its ensuing impact on their self-understanding, differs significantly from that of men. Central to that experience and self-understanding is the concept of relationship, of inter-connectedness.

The feminist psychologists and psychiatrists at the Stone Center for Developmental Services and Studies at Wellesley College are working collaboratively on a psychological theory of Self-in-Relation. Traditional (read white male normative) psychological theory has posited that the goal of healthy development moves steadily from the dependency of infancy toward ever greater autonomy and self sufficiency. The women at the Stone Center (Judith Jordan, Alexandra Kaplan, Jean Baker Miller, Irene Stiver and Janet Surrey) maintain that a healthy self is one which develops in the context of what Jean Baker Miller calls "growth fostering relationships" (Miller 1986). These women are not merely saying that any self is enhanced by quality relationships. Their claim is much more radical. They suggest that selves develop fully only in the context of such relationships.

The insights upon which the Stone Center women base their work arise from the study of women's experience and women's lives.



One way of describing what women do is to say that women try to interact with others in ways which will foster the other person's development in many psychological dimensions, that is, emotionally, intellectually and so on...

Another way to describe this activity is to say that women try to use their powers, that is, their intellectual and emotional abilities, to empower others, to build other people's strength, resources, effectiveness and well-being. (Miller 1976, xx)

Miller goes on to examine the ways in which women have taken on the role of empowerers and bearers of the responsibility for relationships for the entire society, most specifically for men and children. This capacity, which women have developed out of cultural necessity, is a source both of satisfaction and of severe limitation. As Miller points out, such a focus on nurturing relationship for the benefit of others has led to women's self-denial in ways that have ultimately diminished their own personhood. Given the imbalance of power relationships in western society, there has frequently been little mutuality in the interactions. Yet Miller suggests that,

...in the course of projecting into women's domain some of its most troublesome and problematic exigencies, male-led society may also have simultaneously, and unwittingly, delegated to women not humanity's "lowest needs" but its "highest necessities" -- that is, the intense, emotionally connected cooperation and creativity necessary for human life and growth. (Miller 1976, 25)

The dependency of men upon women to maintain the connections for which they abdicate responsibility has come to be experienced by women as meaning that any action which



serves their own self interest will put the relationship in jeopardy. Ironically but not surprisingly, it is this "dependency" of women on relationships which has been noted and defined as pathological, not the dependency of men on securing the services of a woman to carry this vital social function on their behalf.

Although the Stone Center's work is focussed on women's experience, I believe that their insights and research strongly suggest that such a relational approach to psychological development is not only essential to both men's and women's healthy and mutual relating in the world, but is fundamental to human and other well-being. If we adopt the sense of cosmic connection and interrelatedness suggested earlier, relationship is the essence of who we are. Autonomy and self sufficiency are revealed as goals arising out of distorted power relationships which assume a pool of "servants" to supply basic relational needs on demand. A self can afford to be "autonomous" only if it has access to and control over other non-autonomous selves to supply the basic relational matrix which is often unacknowledged but is essential to effective be-ing in the world.

Carol Gilligan, in researching the moral development of women, comes to some of the same conclusions. As in most stage theories of psychology, women's moral development has usually been seen as limited and incapable of reaching



ultimate fullness. Beginning with her startling realization that Lawrence Kohlberg posited his stages of moral development based solely on a sample of male subjects, Gilligan explores the different responses received to hypothetical moral problems when women are the subjects of the study. By exploring the reasoning behind the women's responses, Gilligan points to defects in the construction of the model rather than in women's ability to make moral decisions. Women's "failure," it seems, is their capacity to conceive of the moral problem as arising "from conflicting responsibilities rather than from competing rights and requir(ing) for its resolution a mode of thinking that is contextual and narrative rather than formal and abstract." (Gilligan 1982,19) Women, and young girls, do not separate a moral problem from the relationships involved. Very early, they realize that there are few solutions to such problems in which no one gets hurt, that is, no relationship is endangered. Maintenance of the relationship is more important than adhering to an abstract principle of justice. The insight of women into the ambiguity of such situations has more often than not been seen as indecisiveness rather than as a more inclusive and wholistic approach to the resolution of moral dilemmas.

The concept of a self which actually develops in the context of "dynamic interaction" appears startling in its contrast to traditional psychological notions of self. As



startling, perhaps, as the above discussion of transcendence, or the idea of incarnation as the sacred fully embodied in physical being. Yet, in light of the theological concepts developed in the first chapters of this work, this capacity of women to think and live in terms of relationship and connectedness must be reclaimed as the very antithesis of pathology.

This is not to say that the relationships to which I am referring consist of eternal togetherness devoid of periods of solitude. Yet I believe that it is only when one rests securely in the certain truth of her connection to those who matter in her life (family, friends, pets, plants, the sacred spirit dwelling in all of them) that she can enter into a solitude which is life-enhancing and treasure moments of her own company.

It is important to make a distinction at this point between the self denial of which Miller warns and the kind of mutual interaction which genuine relationship demands. To say that a self develops fully only in the context of relationship is not to negate the distinctive character of each individual within that dynamic. Janet Surrey describes this distinctiveness as "differentiation," which she defines as "a process which encompasses increasing levels of complexity, choice, fluidity and articulation within the context of human relationship." (1985, 8) This is a vastly different concept from that of separation. It also stands



in clear contrast to what Catherine Keller describes as a "soluble" self, where the relationship lacks mutuality, and the distinctiveness of one party becomes dissolved as she (for usually it has been a woman) submerges her own needs and concerns in her efforts to meet the needs of those to whose well-being she is committed (Keller 1986).

Yet women's experience has provided a wealth of knowledge in the area of relationship, even in its most "soluble" form. Woman *knows* that without relationship is nothingness: the vast number of women who remain in abusive situations give poignant witness to the perception that *any* interaction is better than none. As with little girls who abandon a game rather than see relationship fractured (Gilligan 1982, 10), women go to extraordinary, sometimes self-destructive lengths to maintain connection.

### Relationality Embodied

This sense of self-in-relation which pervades women's experience and action in the world begins in the reality of inter-connectedness which is each human person. The book, Our Bodies, Ourselves, (Boston Women's Health Book Collective 1976) names a reality which has often been submerged in the dualism which has pervaded much of Western thought: that our bodies are not something we "have" but are part of who we are. The identification of woman with



bodiliness, that which is of "lesser" value than "pure" intellect or spirit, has been the foundation of much of the misogyny which continues to pervade our culture, and any movement toward reclaiming our body-being needs to take careful note of that history. Yet an identification which nurtures and treasures our physicality as an inherent dimension of our selves is a vital component of relationship.

The body then is my special corner of the cosmos; my relation to my body will reflect and rehearse my relationship to everybody and everything else. For I encounter the world only as embodied. (Keller 1986, 236)

Along with our body-connectedness comes awareness and integration of the senses. My intentness on the computer monitor is relieved by glances at scenes depicting the awesome beauty of the Oregon Coast; the hot chocolate which stimulates my taste buds warms me within while the fireplace warms my back; a Beethoven trio soothes without distracting and aromas from the kitchen remind me that I've forgotten to eat! In pausing to take note of all these, I am aware that the sensations they evoke were present even when I was not consciously thinking about them. They are part of who I am at any -- and every -- given moment.

Emotions are another vital part of a relational being, even those we prefer, or have been taught, to deny or ignore. As women in white western culture, the emotion we often find hardest to embrace is that of anger. Jean Baker



Miller suggests that "the kind of anger which we traditionally have postulated as most extreme" -- that is, the anger most feared by women themselves, and most feared in women by men, was not the original emotion we were born with. "Our environment has created it and shaped it into the form we know." The culture which "creates" this anger then "ascribes anger to a dangerous drive -- ultimately making us afraid of ourselves and unable to use our anger to work for a better structure" (Miller 1983, 8).

Beverly Harrison insists that "anger is a mode of connectedness to others and it is always a vivid form of caring." (Harrison 1985, 14) To Harrison, anger is that which indicates that something is amiss in the social relationships of which we are a part. The very presence of anger in itself can provide us with the "energy to act."

Miller (1986, 5) provides a further vital link as she identifies a reality she calls "feeling-thoughts" or "thought-feelings." The dichotomy in which our culture places these two dimensions of inner life is indicated by the lack of a term which adequately embodies both. Sara Lawrence Lightfoot speaks of her mother devoting "her full energy to the healing of patients, which she sees as inextricably bound to the health and *sentiments* (meaning mind and feeling) of the healers" (Lightfoot 1988, 254, emphasis in original). In an integrated engagement with another person, a book or an idea, both feelings and



thoughts interplay simultaneously in such a way that they too can be distinguished but not separated.

Body-being-feeling-thought: the pulsating, dynamic reality which constitutes human be-ing. The "me" which is always but never only in relationship with itself.

The boundaries of an ocean are its shores, shifting continuously and subtly, sometimes gently, sometimes tempestuously, partly predictably, never controllably. The metaphor suggests an altered notion of ego boundary. (Keller 1986, 100-101)

The metaphor is also powerful reminder of the profound and far-reaching relationship which exists between human being, other earthlings and our earth-home, and the still-wider cosmic reality. In The Universe is a Green Dragon, Brian Swimme creatively illustrates the primal activity which he calls "allurement," and of which our human loves and longings are one expression:

We must begin with the attraction that permeates the entire macro-structure. I'm speaking precisely of the basic binding energy found everywhere in reality. I'm speaking of the primary allurement that all galaxies experience for all other galaxies...The primary result of all allurement is the evocation of being, the creation of community... Allurement evokes being and life. That's what allurement is. Now you can understand what love means: Love is a word that points to this alluring activity in the cosmos. This primal dynamism awakens the communities of atoms, galaxies, stars, families, nations, persons, ecosystems, oceans and stellar systems. Love ignites being. (Swimme 1985, 45, 49)

For Swimme, it is the night sky which permeates his being with the sense of allurement of which he speaks: with the profound knowledge that no part of be-ing is truly



separate and apart from his own. For me, it is the ocean which is my cosmic connector, where I know my smallness and my greatness as part of all that is. Such "oceanic feelings," when evoked, are reminiscent of Audre Lorde's description of the erotic as that which "flows through and colors my life with a kind of energy that heightens and sensitizes and strengthens all my experience" (Lorde 1984, 57).

In light of the above discussion, it is clear that women have a particular role to play at this point in our history in re-incarnating the sacred in true relational embodiment. Let me reiterate here that this does not imply that women are essentially and by nature more relational than our brothers, but rather claims that our culturally determined experience has left us holding what Miller refers to as "humanity's highest necessities" (Miller 1976, 25). Women's role must include a refusal to continue to carry the responsibility for maintaining relationality for the rest of society. Women must seek contexts in which true mutuality, or at least the possibility for its development, exists in order that they be left knowing a greater sense of fulfillment and self-affirmation rather than once again being in a position of denying their own needs and reality in the service of others. Of central importance to women at this time in white western culture is to determine the contexts where their drive for connection with one another,



with other humans and with all creative being, that is, the life of the sacred within them, can be enhanced rather than diminished.

This emphasis on relationship as key to the health and well-being of women, children, men and all earthly and other being is not a plea to return to an ethic of "niceness" which dwells in warm fuzzy feelings of safety and security amidst those with whom one feels most comfortable. This vital point will be developed more fully as I move into discussing the concept of *compañerismo*.



## CHAPTER V

### BEYOND COMMUNITY TO *COMPANERISMO*

My dictionary indicates that the words "communion" and "community" are derived from the Latin *communio*, meaning "mutual participation." Communion is defined as "intimate fellowship or rapport," community as "a unified body of individuals" (emphasis mine). These words pervade Christian literature yet the reality they supposedly describe escapes the experience of most of us, at least in institutional Church contexts. I maintain that such an experience of mutual participation and intimate rapport has been missing from and continues to evade the lived reality of most of us, even those who, like myself, continue to profess membership in an institutionally structured "community."

The word "community" evokes images of the "growth fostering relationships" spoken of by Miller and her colleagues at the Stone Center. Indeed, when Miller outlines the characteristics she has identified as central to such a relationship, it becomes clear that community, rightly understood, is just such a relationship, for growth enhancing relationships are by no means limited to dyads:



Each person feels a greater sense of "zest" (vitality, energy).

Each person feels more able to act and does act.

Each person has a more accurate picture of her/himself and the other person(s).

Each person feels a greater sense of worth.

Each person feels more connected to the other person(s) and a greater motivation for connections with other people beyond those in the specific relationship.

(Miller 1986, 3)

There are few other concepts which are as much discussed, pondered and agonized over, written about or valued as that of "community." As the individualized nature of our culture, which appears to continue unabated in the economic, political, educational and even ecclesial institutions of our society, as well as in individual lives, has led to ever-greater feelings of isolation, loneliness and despair, a broad diversity of persons has turned its eyes and hopes towards "community" as the solution not only to individual loneliness but also to the crucial dilemmas that threaten society and life itself. From parish churches to groups of business executives, women and men are turning to techniques of "community-building" to enhance everything from personal well-being to worker productivity to peace and disarmament.

M. Scott Peck's 1987 book, The Different Drum, is a testimony to the hope placed in community to answer the needs not only of individuals but of a planet in intensifying danger of being destroyed by its human inhabitants. Peck outlines his own experiences with a



variety of groups over a number of years and develops a stage theory of community development. He accurately names the isolated, individualized nature of human life as it has come to be lived in late-twentieth century white western culture as a critical factor in such global concerns as the arms race, and posits the development of community on a local level as the first step to addressing such issues. Peck speaks of the need to move beyond our rigid patterns of autonomy to something he calls "soft individualism," where our ego boundaries become flexible and we can "empty" ourselves of barriers to genuine communication with those both like and different from ourselves.

Peck's book has many important contributions to make in the light of much of the philosophical, disembodied discussion of community which often replaces genuine engagement with one's embodied neighbors in an effort to live in integrity with one another. His emphasis on connection and relationship, his insight that differences need to be celebrated and claimed as positive, and his critique of pseudocommunity provide a necessary corrective for much of what passes for "community" today.

Yet there are problems with both the model and the understanding of "community" which Peck develops. These difficulties highlight the reality that Peck's work is predominantly among white middle to upper class groups who, as experience shows all too clearly, will not automatically



make the leap from experiencing connection with one another to taking seriously their interconnected responsibility for and with the whole of creative being. Relevant to the current discussion are three major factors, each of which warrants some further discussion. The first of these is the idea that genuine community-building can be an end in itself. Second, more often than not these sessions occur among strangers who, after the brief time together, will never see each other again. Third, Peck does not develop a "liberation" methodology which would ensure that his workshop participants would expand the circle of community which they experience further afield than their own immediate circle of like-minded friends. He does not tell us just how we move from such group experiences, usually occurring among people who, while displaying a certain diversity, are of the same or similar race and class and often gender, to the transformation of troublesome political, economic and social structures.

#### Community: From Goal to Process

In his section on "Crisis and Community" (77-81), Peck describes the sense of connectedness and bonding which occurs in the face of natural disasters and war, where people will tend to look back with considerable nostalgia on days which were fraught with tension, uncertainty and often



extreme physical peril. Although Peck does not fully develop this observation, I believe it provides some key insights into the reality that community, like love, is an energy and movement which emerges out of genuine mutual engagement of two or more people, usually when it is least expected and seldom when directly sought. Few of us have escaped periods in our lives when our intense loneliness has sent us in the desperate search of "love" -- and culminated in the experience of pseudo-relationships which may or may not have provided even a temporary relief but which failed to embody anything close to the "growth fostering" engagements referred to above.

The frantic seeking after community in which many engage is a similarly doomed enterprise. The plethora of "intentional communities" which have emerged and almost as quickly died over the past decades give abundant and tragic testimony that something more significant than a yearning for undefined, mythical "community" must bond a group before the kind of mutuality and commitment necessary for on-going viability will be evoked in the members. It is an expression of extreme privilege to be able to take the time and the resources to focus on community as an end in itself.

It is no accident that the most lasting, dynamic and viable communities of which we hear seem to be those which form in response to the critical needs of their members, such as the *comunidades de base* in Latin America and the



Black Church communities in these United States. Both the definition and means of achieving genuine "community" may be something we must learn from those who have been relegated to the margins of our local and global society.

### Community and Commitment

There is no question that a high degree of communion, "mutual participation," can occur between persons who have never met before and who, after a brief encounter, will never meet again. There is a sense, however, in which naming such encounters as an adequate or even genuine experience of the fullness of community is again an expression of privilege. For many of those whom Peck describes, who live in the midst of caring family and have the resources to provide for their deep relational needs and on-going sense of security and acceptance, brief experiences of the "community" he describes may provide a needed energy boost or short-term empowerment. For a woman such as Janice (above), they are woefully insufficient.

Only within the context of genuine mutuality and connection can true community occur. Community has always had to include a level of commitment understood in an on-going way. The word "commitment" is derived from the Latin, *committere*, to connect, entrust. Commitment is defined as an act of committing to a charge or trust; the state of



being obligated or emotionally impelled (emphasis mine). If we take seriously our interconnectedness with all of life, as it was discussed above, we enter into "community" not only with those we choose to spend an occasional weekend or regular evening with, or even those with whom we live our lives day by day. We are committed to the "charge," the "trust," of taking responsibility for our communion, community with all being. We are "emotionally impelled" to do so. Commitment, in this understanding, is not "to" something external but "with" that of which we are an inherent though distinct part. Commitment is no static or objective thing. "It is something you do and something you are" (Huff 1988b, 2). It is this commitment with community, rightly understood, which is the "vocation" of each one of us who share life on this planet. The expressions we choose to give such commitment will be as varied as the splendid diversity of our particular ways of being, yet each will in some way connect us profoundly with and through the holy as embodied in and among us, and most particularly, among those at the margins who have been most violated by the disembodied, individualistic violence which has become the hallmark of contemporary society.



## Community and Transformation

Earlier, I claimed that "I do not work for those who hold the power in place" but that "my people... are those who have been pushed to the margins." (The concept of margins will be further developed in the final chapter of this work.) From a liberation theology perspective, such a focus is not an option but is mandated for all whose privilege has been gained at the expense of countless millions of devalued and discarded hopes, dreams and lives. It is a commitment made in struggle, joy, confusion, love and often terror, never easy, always only partially realized. But "community" which is not in some way linked to the margins and those who have no choice but to occupy such a place cannot name itself true "communion."

We must understand that each of us is able to have our own garden only when we cultivate it in the context of global interdependency and mutual respect, regardless of color, sex, religion, or national size. This is why I say that gardening is a serious and difficult business!... Gardening has to do with *compañerismo*: standing beside one another; being of the same company and commitment...

Another word for *compañerismo* is solidarity... Mutuality and solidarity is what *compañerismo*, *compañera*... is all about. (Benavides 1988, 136)

This form of solidarity is one piece, missing from Peck's description, which is essential to genuine community. Sharon Welch, in redefining "transcendence," (above) sees community as "participation in a communal struggle for liberation" (Welch 1985, 50). Given the variety of meanings



and understandings of "community" which abound in our culture, I maintain that the concept... the reality... under discussion here is better named as *compañerismo*.

*Compañerismo*, from the Spanish word *compañera/o*, meaning "companion in the struggle", reflects a strong and vital dynamism lacking in most definitions -- and experiences -- of "community." *Compañerismo* demands from its participants a whole-hearted commitment -- emotional imperative -- to accompany one another in the struggle, whatever the cost, whatever it takes. *Compañerismo* knows that there are no short-cuts and that the road to fullness of life lies only in a justice seldom if ever experienced in the reality of oppressive structures and unbalanced power relations.

*Compañeras* and *compañeros* know that, in all likelihood, they will not live to see the full results of their labors, but because they know the connectedness of life, not only present but also past and future, they know joy in anticipating greater richness for children born and yet to come.

For in *compañerismo* is that true joy and celebration which can occur only in the knowledge that one is living with the greatest possible degree of integrity -- integration, and that our efforts toward such wholeness constitute our embodiment of the sacred. We can celebrate our delight in small victories, knowing our inability to attain the ideal yet placing our confidence in the holy one



who will continue to incarnate "holyself" (Huff 1989) in the flesh and blood lives of those who come after.

*Compañerismo* does not exist in sitting in groups talking about our own needs or the needs of others, although deep sharing of our struggles and joys, in mutual relation with our *compañeras*, will undoubtedly occur. *Compañeras* know that the myth of "attending to one's own needs before one can have anything to give another" is one more example of dichotomized thinking. In the mutual interaction which occurs in committed struggle together, both realities are seen to be inextricably interwoven.

*Compañerismo* is a dynamic process, not a product, never static or even definable, observable only by the fruits of its presence. *Compañerismo* is alive and well when the citizens of the Philippines gather peacefully to say "enough" and overthrow a violently oppressive dictator; when women gather in Washington D.C. to demand an end to the steady erosion of rights to their own reproductive decisions which disproportionately affect the poorest and most marginalized among them; when the people of Nicaragua refuse to bow down to the imperialistic demands and intervention of the United States and the disenfranchised citizens of Guatemala and El Salvador organize against the oppression of their own governments.

Margaret C. Huff (Huff 1988a), in a re-examination of the concept of nurturing, develops a set of four central



elements which are helpful in exploring the qualities of *compañerismo*.

Huff's first element of nurturing is that of survival. Along with physical survival, she includes emotional and mental survival. It becomes abundantly clear that it is only the most privileged among us who can count on having our physical survival needs met. Emotional survival depends on both unconditional and critical love -- if either kind is absent or too predominant, one will become either self-centered and narcissistic or other-centered and overly submissive (2). Mental survival "depends on learning what the particular society expects of you, what the dominants consider reality" (3). In the most blatant situations of oppression, one's physical survival may also hinge on knowing what society expects.

The second element Huff names is that of empowerment. Empowerment, in her understanding, is exemplified in "encouraging all... , regardless of race, sex, class, or economic condition, to dare to take appropriate risks" (4-5). Again, this seems to apply directly to *compañerismo* in the sense in which I am using the term. It is in such situations of solidarity with one's companions in the struggle that one is indeed enabled to "take appropriate risks."

Solidarity, Huff's third element, means, for the privileged, the relinquishing of certain sorts of



entitlement because of one's commitment to engage in activity with, not usually for another (5). It is this solidarity that ensures that one's *compañera/os*, those most vulnerable, will not stand alone or bear the brunt of attacks by the dominant group.

Finally, Huff outlines an understanding of accountability as her fourth element of nurturing. We are accountable to those with whom we engage in nurturing, to ourselves, for the co-creation of justice, for what we do and what we don't do (6).

Huff's work is helpful both in making a transition from "community" to *compañerismo* and also in outlining some ways in which such *compañerismo* must be lived differently by groups of the oppressed and those more privileged who would stand in solidarity with them. Taking seriously the four elements discussed above in the context of justice-making in which Huff develops them impels us beyond narrow visions of community with a few like-minded friends and neighbors into a vision of inclusiveness which can inform an ethic of *compañerismo*.

Inclusiveness in this concept and experience does not mean that every being must be physically present or even represented in the group which gathers occasionally or lives together day by day. On the contrary, it insists on the need for any marginalized group to focus primarily on its



own particularity in terms of its most imminent oppression.

As Catherine Keller so powerfully warns,

"Feminist separatism" is often a homophobic charge easily hurled at creative women by those who would not think, for instance, of calling Jesus a "separatist" when he claims to be in this world but not of it, or when he retreats into solitude or to his small community of like minded friends. No one changes a world, a culture, without practicing modes of subversive retreat from it. (Keller 1986, 210)  
(Emphasis added)

In true *compañerismo* this retreat is always from the persons, institutions and situations which perpetuate oppression. Retreat is for the kind of nurturance outlined above, nurturance which gives the strength and hope needed to continue in the struggle. For the oppressed, retreat frequently necessitates "exclusion" of representatives of the oppressive class, even those who share the commitment to overcome the unjust situation. This is a difficult and often painful lesson for the privileged to learn. The sense of entitlement which comes with belonging to the dominant group frequently includes a feeling of having a "right" to the friendship and trust of the oppressed, especially if one is willing to stand in solidarity. Fracturing of the possibility of full relational mutuality is one painful way in which oppression injures and limits the oppressor. Care must be taken by the oppressor to own the source of this injury and not once again to blame the victim for what may be a vital and life-enhancing "exclusion." For example, white women who may be vehement in claiming "women-only"



space to do their own organizing work frequently react with pain, confusion and even rage when women of color demand the same space for withdrawal.

For the oppressor, however, such "subversive retreat" has a different focus. Oppressed peoples never have the luxury of leaving the reality of their oppression behind. And in our broken and wounded world, where immense suffering of humans, animals and the earth itself has been inflicted at the hands of representatives of the societal structures which provide our privilege, we who do not struggle for our daily survival cannot... must not... retreat from the truth of the devastated lives of our sisters and brothers, human and other. Into our retreat, we must take with us the memories and stories, the oppression and wounding, the images and tears of the millions whose lives and well-being have been sacrificed in the name of progress for the few. When I take a day for myself to spend alone or with a friend delighting in the quiet beauty of the winter woods or the raging of a stormy ocean, I am often overwhelmed both by beauty and also by anguish over the ecological destruction which threatens the integrity of our earth home, and this is as it should be. Immersed in a work of imaginative fiction, I cannot but be moved by the quality of the relationships between the characters as I compare and contrast them to those I observe and participate in day by day; this, too, is appropriate.



Both oppressor and oppressed, in their experience and expression of *compañerismo*, must encompass survival, empowerment, solidarity and accountability. What I am suggesting is that the emphasis might be different in each situation. Whereas survival, solidarity, empowerment of and accountability to one another are all key for any marginalized group, be it the Quiche Indians in Guatemala, the residents of Soweto, or lesbians in the church, the focus will change depending on the immediate needs of the group. For the privileged, however, I suggest that the dimension of accountability is the one which needs most serious attention, for we must own our accountability not only to others of our own group but to all those whose misery is ensured by our privilege. This is not an invitation to soul-destroying guilt. Rather, it is an acknowledgment of our awareness that the interests of each one of the wounded ones, those excluded from the privilege of the power brokers, are a sacred right; and these sacred rights are ensured by our belated realization that our Christian claims about incarnation are meaningless unless embodied in action which restores the dignity due to every being with whom we share the earth.

Integral to this discussion is the ambivalent reality that most of us are both oppressor and oppressed, often simultaneously. A distinct polarity does not always separate the two groups. June Jordan provides a powerful



description of the tensions involved in such ambiguity when she writes of her vacation in the Bahamas:

There it is again. Something proclaims itself a legitimate history and all it does is track white Mr. Columbus to the British Eleutherians through the Confederate Southerners as they barge into New World surf, land on New World turf, and nobody saying one word about the Bahamian people, the Black peoples...

This is my consciousness of race as I unpack my bathing suit in the Sheraton British Colonial...

We will jostle along with the other (white) visitors and join them... as we, Black Americans as well as white, argue down the price of handwoven goods at the nearby straw market while the merchants, frequently toothless Black women seated on the concrete in their only presentable dress, humble themselves to our careless games...

This is my consciousness of class as I try to decide how much money I can spend on Bahamian gifts for my family back in Brooklyn...

This is my consciousness of race and class and gender identity as I notice the fixed relations between these other Black women and myself. They sell and I buy or I don't. They risk not eating. I risk going broke on my first vacation afternoon. (Jordan 1985, 40-41)

Jordan is no stranger to oppression as Black and as woman. Yet her consciousness of those realities is brought up against her relative economic class privilege compared with the women of the Bahamas. In living with the ambiguity of our multiple relationships with the systems of oppression, we are moved to again acknowledge the presence and challenge of a transcendent expression of the holy. We see the power of the sacred embodied not only within each individual, each species, each culture, each expression of the splendid diversity of being, but also transcending -- crossing over -- the boundaries between them. Taking



seriously a commitment to *compañerismo* involves embodying that transcendent expression of the sacred as well as the immanence of the holy within us.

I am not implying that such experiences as Peck (above) outlines are without value. I am saying that such experiences are a glimpse of the possibility of *compañerismo* only in as much as they empower and impel participants toward ever greater acknowledgment of and responsibility for their interdependence with all of life on this planet. If this does not occur, the impact of "community," as described by Peck, will remain minimal in terms of its potential to achieve the kind of transformation which is the only hope for our survival as a people, as a planet.



## CHAPTER VI

### COMPANERAS DE PAZ

So far I have considered the biases and particularities which inform my work as a feminist liberation theologian, the disembodiment which has been a powerful and disempowering factor in our Christian history, the implications of a hermeneutic of relational embodiment for a renewed vision of incarnation, the reality of relationship as the essence of being, and *compañerismo* as a vital, inclusive, dynamic alternative to most inadequate traditional conceptions of community. I return now to one of the oxymorons with which I began to outline my own identity in relationship to the institutions in which I live my life. In light of the above discussion, how might a new understanding of religious community remove the cognitive dissonance from my claim to be "a passionate, embodied and sexual member of a religious congregation whose affiliates profess the traditional three vows of poverty, obedience and celibacy?"

I begin this exploration by examining briefly some of the "traditional" understandings of women's religious congregations which continue to pervade current experience



in varying degrees, according to the individual community under discussion.

Religious Congregations of Women

In the early days of my novitiate experience with the Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace, I discovered in a dark and dusty corner of the library a little volume entitled Catechism of the Religious Profession. The author warned the aspiring religious sister or brother to beware of "sins indirectly opposed to chastity" (emphasis mine). These included:

...the memory: dangerous reminiscences of our past life... the heart: tender affections, particular friendships....the sight: unrestrained liberty of the eyes, unguarded glances, indiscriminate reading... The hearing: listening with pleasure to improper talk or songs, to stories couched in questionable language, to sensuous music... the touch: unbecoming caresses and other similar demonstrations of affection.  
(Brothers of the Sacred Heart 1954, 84, 85)

Although the pages of this small volume provided a great deal of material for laughter and entertainment among those with whom I shared community, they contain directives which are the epitome of disembodiment and must be examined in light of the number of men and women who have been, and continue to be, locked into patterns of isolation, scrupulosity and a chilling inability to relate on a warm and human level with those with whom they share life on this earth. During the months that followed, I did much reflection on questions of intimacy, relationship and religious life. Perhaps my passionate concern for re-



examining the institution of religious life stems from that time.

The Second Vatican Council, in its mandate to religious communities to re-examine their roots and founding purpose and to experiment with more contemporary ways of living their commitments, opened the opportunity for women in such communities to dialogue and to educate themselves around issues of importance not only to their own congregation, but to their world situation. Prior to this Council, communication between congregations, or among the members within one, was limited by regulations governing travel, use of resources and personal interaction with others. The concept of "particular friendship" is one which older members of communities continue to either struggle with or laugh at. The reason was never clearly articulated as to why it was such a danger for women to develop close and meaningful relationships with one another: at best it was masked under the direction that one needed only Jesus as one's friend, lover, spouse -- and those were the words used for that relationship. Within the authority structures of the community, such "danger" centered in the likelihood of becoming attached to one other rather than available to all, and of being distracted from one's relationship with God. The ecclesial fathers, who imposed and maintained rigid rules around celibacy and general control over the lives of women religious, continued in the manner of Augustine and Aquinas



(above), thus cementing the chain of command which kept power and decision-making firmly in the hands of those given "divine mandate" to exercise authority over those "specially called" to serve God through consecrated celibacy.

Understandings of celibacy, like the other vows, consisted predominantly of a set of rules setting up behaviors that were or were not acceptable, as in the excerpt above. Poverty was considered less as simplicity of lifestyle than as a series of mandates designed to maintain control of the person. Thus "poverty of spirit," instead of being understood as true humility, most often meant humiliation, the loss of self- esteem inherent, for example, in having to ask "Mother" for such basic necessities as toothpaste and Kotex, or for permission to write to one's family. Obedience meant literally doing what one was told. The Superior of the institute was not only considered to be God's representative in the convent, she was also personally responsible for the souls in her care. Of course, this responsibility was never ultimate; there was always the male hierarchy which exercised final control.

During the 1970's and 80's, a great deal of transformation occurred in women "religious'" understandings of the vows of poverty and obedience, especially here in the United States. Women in many congregations maintain their own bank accounts and are financially responsible for their own needs. In most cases, this responsibility occurs in the



context of accountability to the group and continues to enable care of elderly or ill members, ministry of some in areas where no remuneration is available and on-going education and sabbatical activities of others. New understandings of obedience continue to put women religious in this country at odds with the Vatican as women come to understand authority not as a set of rules externally imposed, but as something which results from their own careful listening to the life of the sacred within them, among them and in the lives of the people whose dignity and concerns are at the heart of their ministerial commitments.

In the area of celibacy, however, such re-development has been limited at best. While few communities still retain the prohibition on "particular friendships," most continue to look with some suspicion on deep and committed bonding of members with one another, with other women and with men. Members who leave communities yet seek to maintain some level of connection are charged with "wanting to have their cake and eat it too." They can continue to live simply, probably with less access to economic resources than they enjoyed as community members; they can remain dedicated, obedient members of the church; but if they marry, or, worse yet, enter into some other kind of intimate relationship, however committed, they are seen as somehow being unable to live the full religious life.



This inability to deal honestly and openly with the issue of sexuality, particularly as it is embodied in the lives of real flesh and blood women, is central to the policies, promulgated by current Vatican occupants, which are designed to keep women in general and "women religious" in particular disassociated from their own bodily being, from embodied relationality with one another and from expressing such relationality in solidarity with their sisters throughout the world. The terror with which such authoritarian institutions perceive the energy which is generated when women take seriously their bondedness with each other is made manifest in increasingly restrictive rules and prescriptions designed to keep women's physical being securely under male clerical control. Of particular interest here is the degree to which women religious have, through their operation of health care and educational institutions, developed a high degree of leadership and administrative expertise. Since the transformations initiated with the Second Vatican Council, members have also embarked upon theological education in remarkable numbers. These factors do nothing to allay the fears of their frequently less competent brothers in Rome... or in their local dioceses.

As in all cases of oppression, women, and women religious in particular, have internalized to a large extent this perception of the danger of their bodiliness,



especially when they consider embodiment their commitments to solidarity with their sisters. The incapacity of religious congregations of women to become a truly embodied expression of *compañerismo* is a tragic result of this internalized oppression handed down from a destructively repressive institution. Yet I believe that within such congregations lies a seed of possibility for authentic women-bonding. The remainder of this work will attempt to work with these seeds and explore ways in which they might be encouraged to sprout into an abundant fullness which would move us from a concept of "women's religious congregations" to one of "*compañeras* embodying the sacred in *compañerismo*."

#### From Women Religious to *Compañeras*

A participant in a workshop I was attending once told how, as a child in Catholic grade school, she used to think there were three sexes: men, women and nuns. With the shedding of the habit in many congregations, especially in the United States and Canada, "nuns" have to some extent claimed their womanhood as they have explored what it means to look like a woman in this society. Along with an increased sense of freedom, they have discovered themselves no longer immune to the sexual harrassment and degradation which historically has plagued their sisters. But what does



it mean for women religious to claim their womanhood in a way that transforms them into *compañeras*?

There are three areas which are crucial if such a transformation is to occur. First, women must renounce their fear of, and ambivalence about, their own bodies in order to freely and joyfully experience the reality of embodied relationality. Second, women within religious communities must take seriously the reality which Janice Raymond calls "gyn/affection" (Raymond 1986). And third, the lay/religious split must be systemically eliminated if women are to embody in their lived experience their commitments to greater mutuality and to justice for all of their sisters.

#### Embodied Woman:

A woman conducting a workshop on body awareness for a religious congregation posed this question to the group: "If someone took a photograph of your community, or even a dozen of you, naked, and then cut off the heads, would you recognize your own body?" The response of most to whom she tells this story is one of laughter. Yet how many women, "religious" and otherwise, might find such a challenge deeply embarrassing... and very difficult? Even those of us who theoretically accept the goodness of material being, human and otherwise, have greater trouble acknowledging that our own bodily reality is truly a good and holy expression



of the sacred. We are bombarded in the media by images of what a "good" body looks like, and we aren't it!

Not surprisingly, given our negative views of our own bodies, for protection and defense we cling to prohibitions about sharing those bodies. As we refuse to let others too close to us emotionally in case they discover who we really are, so we keep our physical distance in order that our bodily deficiencies remain undetected -- and so that our bodily passions are not aroused. But being a *compañera* involves passion, and in an integrated view of being, we cannot separate our spiritual, emotional and intellectual passions from the passions experienced in our body-being. I am not speaking here of the reckless, frequently heartless physical abandon which often comes to mind in the wake of the so-called "sexual revolution." I am speaking of that passion which has its roots in the same Latin word *passio* as does "patience" and "compassion." Passion which means, literally, to suffer, from the Latin *suffrere* -- to sustain, to bear up from under (American Heritage Dictionary 1969). This interpretation stands in direct contrast to concepts of passivity, from *passivus*, a being acted upon from the outside.

The passion which leads to "a passion for justice" (Heyward 1984) has its roots in Eros, the creative power and energy identified by Audre Lorde when she speaks of the erotic as "a kernel within myself (that)... flows through



and colors my life with a kind of energy that heightens and sensitizes and strengthens all my experience" (Lorde 1984, 57). Compare this image with the definition of Eros as "aspiring and fulfilling love often having a sensual quality." In contrast, note the definition of cupidity, from the Roman god of love, Cupid: "Inordinate desire for wealth." It is not within the scope of this paper to enquire into the roots of such divergent understandings of "love," but a cursory glance at the daily paper gives ample testimony as to which definition pervades the structures and institutions which shape our communal life as a society. To bring about a renewed sense of "passion for justice" may indeed require a societal transformation from Cupid to Eros.

*Compañeras* participate in this vital process by "coming out" with their passions, allowing true "eros" to motivate, energize and empower their relationships and actions. *Compañeras* are alive with courage -- *coeur-rage* -- heart-rage -- which has nothing to do with Cupid and everything to do with Eros. The passionate love of *coeur-rage* refuses to yield to the powers of alienation and claims as its core a radical and embodied connection with every human and non-human being with whom we share this planet. This courage, both raging and erotic, fully embodied in the passionate lives of *compañeras*, is the ground of true solidarity and *compañerismo*.



Traditional interpretations of celibacy have given us a high degree of protection from such a "dire" eventuality as the power which would be released if the thousands of "religious" women in this country alone took seriously the challenge to ground their "spiritual" lives in acceptance and celebration of their own embodiment, and in empowering, embodied and passionate engagement with their sisters both in community and in the wider church and society. Yet if one accepts the notion developed above of the Holy, fully embodied in and among the flesh-and-blood reality of human living, then we must accept this truth as part of our own embodied being. Incarnation must take place in the lives of *compañeras*.

Gyn/Affection:

The "call" to religious community has been understood in many ways through the years: an act of resistance against traditional patterns of patriarchal marriage, a response to a felt love of God, often expressed in such terminology as "the bride of Christ," and fleeing the evils of the material world. I maintain that today, and probably in times past to a wider extent than acknowledged, a primary motivation for women coming together in community has been that of "gyn/affection" (Raymond, 1986).

...Buried deep in the past, present, and future of female existence is an original and primary attraction of women for women... It is manifested by many different women in many different ways. Women who have manifested and do manifest this affection for



women initially care about their Selves and thus  
cherish the friendship of others like their Selves...  
...The *original woman* (is) the woman who searches  
for and claims her relational origins with her vital  
Self and with other vital women. (Raymond 1986, 5)

For Raymond, the basic meaning of "gyn/affection"  
"is that women affect, move, stir and arouse each other to  
full power" (9). It is this power which is most alarming  
not only to those who are invested in maintaining power  
over subordinates, but also to women themselves. For this  
is not the powerlessness to which women are accustomed,  
which has a certain pay-off in being able to relegate the  
responsibility to the superior, the Pope or God Himself.  
Gyn/affection power is, I believe, the connective energy  
which Audre Lorde describes as the erotic (above).

If fear of one's own bodily passions and sexuality  
remains prevalent among "women religious," fear  
of charges of lesbianism is similarly inhibiting in the  
movement towards *compañerismo*. In common with most of  
institutional Christianity, women in religious congregations  
have been well indoctrinated into the heterosexism which  
pervades western culture. To speak of erotic attachments  
and attraction between and among women is still a taboo in  
many "religious" contexts. Yet Hannah Ward asserts that  
"there are some interesting discussions to be had between...  
feminist nuns and radical lesbians" (Ward 1987, 75). I  
maintain that such discussions are more than potentially  
"interesting" -- they are crucial.



Adrienne Rich notes that "lesbians have been forced to live between two cultures, both male-dominated, each of which has denied and endangered our existence" (Rich 1979, 225). Rich is referring to the wider society with its male-defined heterosexist assumptions, and to the gay community, largely male dominated. Yet she goes on to say that "in spite of this, lesbians throughout history have survived, worked, supported each other in community, and passionately loved" (225-6). A careful reflection on the experience of "women religious" might reveal more similarity than many want to consider in terms of the patriarchal context of cultural and ecclesial institutions in which we have, nonetheless, "survived, worked and supported each other in community." The key question, in light of my discussion of passionate embodiment, is the extent to which we have "passionately loved" -- ourselves, each other, our sisters and brothers, the rest of our co-earthlings.

Embracing gyn/affective power means opening our eyes to the extent to which our distance from our sisters, most particularly those who name themselves "lesbian," is the product of a heterosexist patriarchy which knows, but cannot afford to let us even guess, that

It is the lesbian in every woman who is compelled by female energy, who gravitates toward strong women, who seeks a literature that seeks that energy and strength. It is the lesbian in us that drives us to feel imaginatively, render in language, grasp, the full connection between woman and woman. It is the lesbian in us who is creative, for the



dutiful daughter of the fathers in us is only a  
hack. (Rich 1979, 200-201)

Rich is aware that her use of the term "lesbian" to denote this basic reality in all women is problematic not only to women whose basic erotic/sexual orientation is toward men, but also to lesbian women who have suffered the consequences of claiming eroticism between and among women as a true alternative to heterosexuality. Her interpretation of the word when she speaks of "the lesbian in every women" is, I believe, analogous to Raymond's "gyn/affection." Both terms invite consideration of a powerful primal energy which exists between and among women, whether or not they embody such attraction and connection in genital sexual encounters.

Gyn/affective power is released and celebrated as women become *compañeras* by embodying "the full connection between woman and woman." This "gyn/affective" power is the power to claim full response/ability for one's agency in the world. Such "response/ability" becomes, quite literally, our capacity to respond, rather than react, to situations of oppression. *Compañeras* who know their own power in relation with one another have such ability. Reaction occurs when we are disembodied, alienated from our own deepest integrity and from our sisters and brothers. Reaction is reflexive rather than reflective, and frequently leaves us with feelings of inadequacy and uneasiness. Response, on the



other hand, is made possible by our continuing experience of our own wholeness as embodied beings, in relationship with our *compañeras*. We are empowered to respond rather than to react when, together, we discover what it means to integrate our thoughts and feelings in relation to a given situation and determine an appropriate response. Our gyn/affective power, discovered in relationship, also enhances our capacity to respond individually, because we know that even when we experience a situation of aloneness, our *compañeras* are with us in a very real way. The development of this "response/ability" is a risky enterprise. As we empower ourselves and one another to embody our passion for justice in our responses to the persons and institutions with whom we live day by day, we realize a new level of accountability. Yet as *compañeras* we are freed and empowered to do the best we can while maintaining the humility of knowing that the task is not ours alone.

Lay and Religious No More:

As the clergy/lay division is beginning to haunt those denominations which now ordain women, so a similar division between lay and religious has been used historically to prevent the empowering bonding of women within Roman Catholicism. Relinquishing the habit, dropping the use of "Sister" as a form of address, and ministering in situations which address the violence experienced by women in poverty or abusive relationships have all helped to mute the



distinction. Yet for most of us, even choosing to live among those with whom we work, however marginalized, is still a choice wherein we retain access to the resources of our congregation, our education and our institutional privilege.

A systemic removal of the lay/religious split would entail a much more radical risk. For example, as we consider those elements which constitute the core, the heart of who we are, we might no longer find it necessary or helpful to cling to such distinctions as vowed and associate membership. I am not suggesting that there is no place for the intentional commitment of groups of women (and possibly men) to deeply shared values. What I propose here is that the vows as they have been traditionally understood are no longer adequate as the basis for that commitment. The time has come for religious congregations to re-examine the vows as one of the structures which have kept women alienated from themselves and each other, and all too often from the rest of creative/creating being. Each congregation, indeed each "religious," must question the extent to which the original impulses motivating the adoption of the three vows of poverty, celibacy and obedience are or even can be lived with integrity in today's world.

A renewed look at poverty in terms of a hermeneutic of relational embodiment insists upon a valuing and sharing of the bounty of the earth in love and concern for all



earthlings, human and other, as the center of our commitment. Our use of resources must take into account our own needs, and the needs of our sisters and brothers, human, animal, plant, earth, water and air. The survival not only of our own species but of earth itself is at stake. The violent death of one South African Black will stir our sense of outrage -- courage -- and demand our action. The grounding of one oil tanker off the Alaskan coast, with the resulting devastation of local marine life, will bring home to us that the inherent relationality of all being is fractured, and must be restored, by human response/ability. The particularity of each species will be treasured to such an extent that the extinction of any would be recognized as an unmitigated tragedy.

Celibacy, in such a hermeneutic, moves beyond rules and restrictions to a commitment to relationships of genuine mutuality and deep love which give birth to and nurture the life of the sacred among all of the beings involved. Celibacy, in this understanding, is a radical way of standing in relationship, yet strong in one's own truth and sense of self.

...Celibacy... is not even limited to the condition of being unmarried. Celibacy... is that dimension of me which can never be given away, exhausted, or comprehended... It is my integrated character, my interior freedom to love and to receive love. (Gustafson 1978, 4)

Understood in this light, celibacy is no longer a matter of regulating "which bits of the other person I do or



don't touch with which bits of me" (Ward 1987, 80). The criteria for expressing one's embodied relationality with another individual or group are rooted instead in the quality of mutuality in the particular relationships, in the context of the whole life situation of each/all of the persons involved. Central to such criteria are the qualities of nurturing discussed above: survival, empowerment, solidarity and accountability. Applying each of these dimensions, through the lens of committed mutuality inherent in relational embodiment, carries the potential for liberating and empowering relationships which will in turn empower the other relationships in which each person is engaged.

The revitalized understanding of "poverty" and "celibacy" invited by a hermeneutic of relational embodiment demands a radically new approach to obedience. At the heart of such redefinition is our conception of the meaning of power. The Oxford English Dictionary traces the origin of the word back to the Old French *poeir*, to be able. By the 8th Century, however, this word had been supplanted by the Latin *potere*, to be powerful. "Relational embodiment" which encompasses an affirmation of the goodness of bodily being and the integrity of gyn/affection has to do with "being powerful" only in the sense of "being able," -- response/able.



The "godness" inherent in women's lives as *compañeras* with one another, and with the whole earth community of being, has profound implications for traditional concepts of authority. Such a challenge to their power of office may be the greatest fear of the Fathers of the Church. The primordial impulse towards relationships of mutuality, as understood and developed by Raymond (1986), Swimme (1985), Heyward (1982, 84, 88, 89), Huff (1987, 88a,b) Miller (1982) and Surrey (1987) is at the heart of concepts of community understood as "mutual participation," and of genuine authority. Such an understanding is totally incompatible with relationships of "power over," where access to resources privilege one group over another and the final decision-making capacity rests with one party. Tension over this issue precipitated Vatican attacks on Raymond Hunthausen, whose collaborative administrative style drew charges that he "lacked the leadership necessary" to "rule" the Archdiocese of Seattle. Latin American Liberation theologians, who have encouraged the formation of communities of solidarity and mutuality among and with their people, have also drawn down the wrath of Rome. This same issue ultimately will require that religious congregations of women and men, who have taken seriously the call to renewal of Vatican II, to decide whether to continue the struggle toward mutual response/ability and accountability, or to yield to the myth of an externally-imposed divine



authority mediated through the human institution called Church.

Could it be that the struggle for the possibilities of relational mutuality is a "primordial source" for authority?... an authority that is, by definition then, neither simply outside us nor inside us, but rather between and among us? ... "Lines of struggle" between... the authority of our own voice... and the authority of the voices of others, including those who disagree with us. I believe that authority - that which (or those whom) we can trust - meets us in the relation between and among ourselves. No one of us "has" it. It is not a possession. It is dynamic, a relational movement. (Emphasis in original.) (Heyward 1988)

Life in *compañerismo* becomes essential for the development and implementation of the kind of authority to which Heyward refers. A totally subjective and potentially relativistic understanding of truth and reality is mitigated by insistence upon a constructive relational context in which one's own voice is valued along with the voices of others (Belenky et al, 1987). The voice of every member is heard, valued and needed in the making of decisions affecting the life of all. A process of consensus can be developed in which no decision is reached without serious consideration to dissenting views, even when voiced by a small minority.

Such an understanding of authority reclaims agency and response/ability for human persons in the here-and-now, flesh-and-blood world, and challenges today's religious congregations to reflect upon the voices which are not heard within their own limited context.



The lay/religious split is revealed as an artificial and dangerous division among women in light of the above development of a contemporary interpretation of the commitment required by *compañeras* seeking fullness of life for all of earth's beingness. If we are to live fully our commitment as *compañeras*, we need also to develop a structure for doing so in which we refuse to retain the ersatz privilege of clinging to institutional affiliation over and against our "lay" sisters and brothers.

### Beyond Congregation

#### Sheep in Need of a Shepherd?

If "community" is inadequate as a locus for the incarnation of an ethic of embodied relationality, "congregation" is still more problematic. The word "congregation" is derived from the Latin *gregarius*, a flock or herd, and carries with it all the attendant imagery of a mindless mass in need of a shepherd to make decisions and take care of the members' best interests. Such imagery is captured in the term "pastor," meaning "herdsman," the one into whose charge a congregation of believers in a parish is given. As women become *compañeras* and "grow up" and into fullness in their relationships with one another, so they will also "grow up" in terms of their relationship with the



sacred "compañera" whom they call "God," and no longer be in need of a shepherd, especially a herdsman.

The scriptural images of the people of God as sheep in need of a shepherd need to be carefully considered in terms of today's reality of abusive power relationships both in the church and in society at large. Members of canonical religious "congregations" must analyze the power relationships which permeate the structures of their life together. In particular, they need to pay careful attention to the fact that the isolated instances of greater mutuality which they experience from time to time, or even as the primary mode of operation in their own immediate context, do not negate the overall patriarchal domination and control which lies behind institutional Catholicism, as well as such other abusive structures in our economic, social, political and domestic lives.

*Compañerismo* demands of its adherents that they relate in patterns of genuine mutuality with each other. Sarah Lucia Hoagland states that community members frequently fall into the trap of seeking safety as "an attempt to ease the risk of interacting" (Hoagland 1988, 194). She goes on to suggest an alternate goal for (in her context) lesbians in search of community:

I want to suggest that, rather than working toward safety, we work on taking each other seriously as a goal...

... If we are focused on safety, we can be tempted to tolerate absolutely anything another lesbian



does... Yet tolerating absolutely anything a lesbian does may not be taking her seriously at all. It may be, rather, confusing empathy with pity, to have no expectations of her and hence to regard her as less than ourselves...

In a space in which we are taken seriously, "safety" is not defined only on our own terms. Being taken seriously involves community; it involves engagement with others. (Hoagland 1988, 195)

As long as any person -- or other being -- is harmed by unjust power relations, no one is safe; and all who continue to affiliate with the institution involved are to some extent complicit in the injustice. For many, withdrawal from such institutions constitutes the most authentic action. For others, integrity lies in maintaining their connection and affiliation in order to attempt to effect transformation from within. In reality, it is not possible for any of us to withdraw from all oppressive structures and systems. For those of us who remain, our accountability lies in becoming increasingly aware of, and challenging, the patterns of domination and oppression which underlie the often seemingly benign actions of those with the ultimate power of resource distribution and decision making. As *compañeras*, we work in solidarity to create new and empowering models of relationship on both a personal and institutional level. Such continual self-reflection on the nature of our on-going complicity in and action against oppressive power relationships is central to life in *compañerismo*.



Hoagland's challenge to "take each other seriously" is deeply relevant to the current discussion. In their relationships with one another, and with those with whom they minister, *compañeras* take one another seriously by embodying all of the dimensions of nurturing outlined earlier. In *compañerismo*, each *compañera* receives what she needs for survival and empowerment through knowing solidarity with her sisters. At the same time, she is taken seriously by being held accountable for her own complicity in the situations which are oppressing her and others, whether it be an abusive relationship with a sexual partner or pain at her felt exclusion from certain ecclesiastical functions. In *compañerismo*, being held in love and support and being held accountable are not mutually exclusive.

*Compañerismo* exists in the creative tension between the two.

The centrality of a critical power analysis to any attempt to live authentically a life of relational embodiment in *compañerismo* has far-reaching implications for such religious "congregations" of women as the one in which I maintain membership. (The official title of the organization is "Congregation of the Sisters of St Joseph of Peace." For current purposes I shall use the term Compañeras de Paz.) Three areas demand consideration as I explore what a renewed expression of our founding charism of "peace through justice" might look like, lived in the context of *compañerismo*: the meaning of a preferential



option for and with those inhabiting the "margins" of society; the implications of such an understanding for expressions of ministry; and a renewed approach to commitment in light of the above discussion of the vows.

### The Challenge of the Margins

The concept of "margin" -- and its correlatives "marginality" and "marginalized" -- have been much used and mis-used in well-meaning liberal and even radical discourse about oppression. From its Indo-European root *merg*, meaning boundary or border, (American Heritage Dictionary 1969) "margin" has come to symbolize the place to which those who cannot "make it" in our society are relegated. The dictionary offers some definitions which aid in re-thinking the concept of "marginality" in light of the current discussion of *compañerismo*: "the part of a page or sheet outside the main body...; a bare minimum below which or an extreme limit beyond which something becomes impossible or is no longer desirable." (Emphasis added.)

Since power analysis is central to the transformation of oppressive structures, "marginality" can be conceptualized as the result of social and political injustice. As Bell Hooks points out, the term "social oppression" is a redundancy (Hooks 1984, 5). Being forced to the margins is always the result of an act or actions of injustice on the part of those who hold the power structures in place. Hooks points out, however, that those who inhabit the margins have



a unique opportunity to perceive the entire social context in a wholistic manner denied to those in power.

To be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body. As black Americans living in a small Kentucky town, the railroad tracks were a daily reminder of our marginality... Across those tracks was a world we could work in as maids, as janitors, as prostitutes, as long as it was in a service capacity. We could enter that world but we could not live there. We had always to return to the margin, to cross the tracks...

...Living as we did -- on the edge -- we developed a particular way of seeing reality. We looked both from the outside in and from the inside out. We focused our attention on the center as well as on the margin... Our survival depended on an ongoing public awareness of the separation between margin and center and an ongoing private acknowledgment that we were a necessary, vital part of that whole.

This sense of wholeness, impressed upon our consciousness by the structure of our daily lives, provided us an oppositional world view -- a mode of seeing unknown to most of our oppressors, that sustained us, aided us in our struggle to transcend poverty and despair, strengthened our sense of self and our solidarity. (Hooks 1984, ix)

To affirm the perspective gained by those "at the margins" is not to diminish the necessity to fight against the injustice that created the margins in the first place. The power of Hooks' words lies in the experience of a community which was able to use such marginalization to gain a clearer vision of the oppression being perpetrated against it and to use those insights both to strengthen the community and to challenge the limitations imposed by the surrounding dominant culture.

Although as women in a patriarchal ecclesial structure, the *Compañeras de Paz* may be considered "marginal," from an



economic, educational and ethnic perspective we retain the privilege pertaining to the dominant culture. The challenge to us as *compañeras* who try to embody a commitment to "respect the dignity of all persons, to value the gifts of creation, and to confront oppressive situations" (Draft Constitution 1988, 6) is to choose those "margins" where we can stand in solidarity with and be challenged and taught by those who understand marginality and power distortion from the perspectives discussed by Hooks.

The weight of suffering and oppression borne by so many people today, especially those who are economically poor, cries out to us for action. Our response demands a firm commitment to work for justice in solidarity with our sisters and brothers.

...We commit ourselves to be involved in ministries and action which affect the contemporary situation of women in the church and in society.

...We develop a critical, sensitive conscience regarding religious, social, cultural, economic, and political realities, and we direct our efforts to actions which bring peace through justice.

(Draft Constitutions 1988, 11)

Words about solidarity remain solely "words" as long as we retain a place of privilege in the institutions which oppress us and our sisters and brothers. Yet a commitment to become a "margin" people is a risky enterprise. Solidarity with women, as mandated in the congregational documents of the *Compañeras de Paz*, will inevitably lead to friction, and possibly insoluble differences, with the ecclesial hierarchy, particularly if we take seriously the claims made above regarding the centrality of power analysis in all justice work. Solidarity with the poor,



particularly those who are women, will necessitate the continual challenging of societal and political as well as ecclesial structures and policies. The "price" may indeed be high, potentially including rejection of canonical approval, of our tax-free status and of much of our economic security, whenever any of these symbols of privilege can be retained only at the cost of our own integrity as *compañeras* committed to structures of justice and mutual empowerment. The "price" for refusing such solidarity means rejecting the "wilderness" in which we have journeyed since Vatican II and returning to slavery in Egypt (Heyward 1989).

#### Ministering With

Implicit in any understanding of *compañerismo* is the acknowledgment that each embodiment of the sacred in this world, human and otherwise, has wisdom to contribute which is essential to the whole. I am indebted to conversations with Margaret Huff in which we explored and developed the awareness that we live in *compañerismo with*, minister with, make love with, and make commitments with and not to each other. Far from being a semantic distinction, the difference is central to any understanding of ministry in *compañerismo*.

Ecclesiastical imperialism will continue unabated as long as we speak of ministering to the poor, the lesbian and gay community, ethnic "minorities" or anyone else. As *Compañeras de Paz*, our challenge is to place the lives of



such so-called "marginalized" groups at the center of our own commitments in such a way that their lives inform and challenge our own at the same time that we are challenging the structures which maintain such marginality, especially those in which we are to some extent complicit.

Liberation theologians speak of giving a "hermeneutical privilege" to the oppressed. By this, they mean allowing the experience of oppressed groups to form the basic interpretive principles upon which their theological work is based. I suggest that the *Compañeras de Paz* must give a ministerial privilege to those with whom they are committed to stand in solidarity. Battered women, for example, must be involved in setting the agenda for development of ministry programs designed to address their needs. Homes for people with AIDS cannot be established without the participation, from the inception of the plan, of representatives of the high-risk populations whose members will be primary occupants. Educational programs to be offered in the inner city will be determined in mutual cooperation between the service providers and the parents and others who will be the major consumers. And accountability for the programs will likewise be shared, as evaluation of their success or failure addresses the extent to which all parties have met their stated goals.



### The Vows and *Compañerismo*

In recent years, many religious congregations, including the Sisters of St Joseph of Peace, have adopted a new level of membership which is open to a wider constituency than Roman Catholic women willing to vow poverty, obedience and celibacy. Much of the impetus for such a movement has come from women who have "left" their congregations for a variety of reasons, yet who continue to feel committed to the vision of the group and want to retain some formal sense of connection.

Although the concept of "associate membership," as it is sometimes called, presents a way for a certain level of association with a variety of persons of different gender, lifestyle and religious orientation, it nonetheless continues to denote a lay/religious division which prevents true *compañerismo*.

In light of the above discussion of the traditional three vows, I ask: is there anything in the commitments to engage in tender care for earth and her resources, to enter into relationships of genuine mutuality and deep love, and to claim the authority and response/ability of life shared in *compañerismo*, which do not apply to all people who name themselves "religious" -- or Christian? And as I engage in conversation, reflection, ministry, creative action, with a splendid though "unlikely coalition of justice-seeking friends" (Hunt 1986), I believe that the time has come to



reject as restrictive the vows as they have been traditionally stated and understood. Rather, a new expression of their underlying truth, one that nourishes women's capacity to come together and unleash gyn/affective power in all of its potential, should be the basis for *compañerismo*.

Instead of the separation of today's congregations into vowed and associate members, I suggest a single form of membership which could contain a myriad of equally valid expressions of a commitment to embodied relationality in the context of *compañerismo*. Celibate, married, single, lesbian and gay persons would mutually decide, with their *compañeras*, the particular way in which they would express their commitments in their day by day lives in *compañerismo*. The *Compañeras de Paz* would continue to share their deep and passionate commitment to the justice mandate explicit in their historical and contemporary documents. This would constitute their "particularity," their own sense of purpose and mission. In such a stance, the *Compañeras de Paz* would state with their lives what they have written in their documents. They would be agents of releasing into a world wounded by the tragedy of fractured relationality the potential of transformative gyn/affective Eros... love... power.

I am aware that the seeds of hope which underlie the vision articulated in this work, seeds of the possibility of



*compañerismo*, flourished in a family which included dog, cats and occasionally a parakeet and some goldfish and where love and relationship were a "given." They have been nurtured in deep and lasting friendships with *compañeras* with whom I have been able to learn the meaning of mutuality in both support and challenge. I have been blessed with a community in which I have been able to begin to test and to live at least some components of what *compañerismo* could be. And yes, I have even been fed (occasionally) by a church which, while mired in its own patriarchal institutionalism, still holds a certain if limited capacity to reflect the sense of social imperative inherent in Christianity.

I am aware also of the debt I owe to such "marginalized" beings as the homeless women I worked among in Seattle, the *indigenas* of Guatemala who touched my life in the summer of 1988, the ocean and mountains of New Zealand and the Northwest United States, my canine friend Sugar whose dark eyes meet mine as she nudges my hand to let me know it's time for a walk or just a little affection. Without the writings of women such as Bell Hooks, Audre Lorde and Katie Cannon my unconscious acceptance of my own race and class privilege would have continued unabated. The work of sisters such as Carter Heyward, Adrienne Rich and Beverly Harrison has given me courage to claim my own identity in all of its embodied truth and to look with open eyes at the institution of compulsory heterosexuality which



denies the possibility of gyn/affection fully expressed in lesbian love.

Such experiences are the "stuff" out of which I, like all liberation theologians, develop my work. They are always, at best, but partial glimpses of the potential for the fullness of life which could be ours should we but take seriously the embodied, relational, incarnational impulse of the faith we profess. Such glimpses will not transform the world, but when sown in the fertile ground of *compañerismo* they can provide hope and vision which will take root and flourish in the lived commitment of *compañeras*. Vision, of course, is only ever a beginning, only ever partially realized. But it is a beginning, a place to start.

Let the revolution begin!



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